

Case study of a school principal

(A handout in conjunction with the presentation of
The Old Mother Hubbard Syndrome by David Loader.

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A few copies of book, *The Inner Principal*, are available for purchase at the conference from the
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Chapter 4. The Empty Principal

'We cannot spend in good works more time than we have earned in meditation.'
(Rabbi Moshe Leib)

Are there any school principals who have not felt at some stage, and maybe many times, that they have so depleted their energy sources that there is nothing left, that they are running on empty? Fullan writes:

Overload and fragmentation are two major barriers to education reform, and they are related. Overload is the continuous stream of planned and unplanned changes that affect the school. Educators must contend constantly with multiple innovations and myriad policies and they must deal with them all at once. Overload is compounded by a host of unplanned changes and problems, including technological developments, shifting demographics, family and community complexities, economic and political pressures and more. Fragmentation occurs when the pressures - and even the opportunities - for reform work at cross purposes or seem disjointed and incoherent. ... Overload and fragmentation ... take their toll on the most committed, who find that will alone is not sufficient to achieve or sustain reform. (Fullan, 1996, 420)

IN MY EMPTINESS

With depleted energy resources, I was attracted in 1994 to a conference, 'Sources of Renewal for Educators' run by the Friends' Council on Education at their retreat centre in Pendle Hill, Pennsylvania. The conference theme was to explore the sources of spiritual vitality in our personal and professional lives. I decided to attend the conference and to stay for a week after the conference as a 'Sojourner' in this Quakers retreat. This had to be one of the best decisions that I had made in my life. This conference gave me a new sensitivity to myself, a new awareness of others and a better understanding of the educational task. The conference was led by Dr Paul Lacey. Paul was a quiet, gentle person, open to others, not afraid of showing

personal emotion, being present in discussions and bringing not only his personal experiences but richness from his study of English literature. The style of the conference was simple: some introductory comments, a reading or two, an invitation for us to spend time writing and then, subsequently, to share our writing if we felt we would like to do this. There were no prizes for the best written material or the most original presentation. Nothing was collected afterwards but I am pleased to have copies of my writing, upon which I can now reflect. Furthermore Paul did not carry a brief case of reading home that night. He was free to think and prepare.

As I reflected on my writing experience, I thought about the students' experiences of writing. The things many students like least is having their work marked. The thing teachers like least is marking students' work. Yet the strange thing is that schools seem to be organised around the setting of assignments and their marking rather than the personal discovery that students may achieve from writing.

Initially I found writing difficult. I thought about what others might say when they heard it read to them. After all, most of my writing to this point had been for other people - a report for council, a letter to parents, minutes from meetings and, of course, exam papers. This writing was for me. I was to be the audience. Furthermore, in this case the value was more in the process of writing, as I sorted out my thoughts and feelings, than in the product. The word 'writing' was not to be a noun but an active verb! This writing was a chance to explore some personal issues. If I felt that there was something to be gained for me or the audience, then I could choose to share these insights by reading my writing.

The writing task was to be enjoyed for itself and in the process of our full participation we will get in touch with ourselves, with others and with the universe. I remember Paul Lacey saying that, if we only think of meaning as something which must be distilled from our daily lives, we will be frustrated and unhappy much of the time. The secret is to find the meaning diffused in our lives, not separate from the living. The metaphor used was of fish breathing water, drawing the life giving oxygen from the medium in which they live and move and have their being. This is a metaphor for living life, focusing on the being rather than on the doing and by this means getting in touch with self, others and the universe. Each moment is important for itself.

In Buddhism, there is a word, *apranihita*. It means wishlessness, or aimlessness. The idea is that we do not put anything ahead of ourselves and run after it. When we practise sitting meditation, we sit just to enjoy the sitting. We do not sit in order to become enlightened, a Buddha, or anything else. Each moment we sit brings us back to life, and therefore, we sit in a way that we enjoy our sitting the entire time. (Thich Nhat Hanh, 1994, 243)

As I reflected on my school days, once again a contrast was apparent. It is not the grade at the end of school but the learning as you make your way to your finals that matters. How often as a principal have I been more concerned with the destination and ignored the journey, with doing rather than being? 'I will take time for myself when the holidays come,' has been my attitude. But is this good enough?

One of the readings that Paul Lacey gave us was from a poem by Michael Pettit, "1000 Cranes". I have extracted some of his words:

What if, in answer to need or pain,
you were to fold 1000 cranes?
....
Believing with each motion
you move closer to your wish, that passion
.....

Doubting, for that is human,
for the moment what you have begun
.....
What would you ask to happen
that had not happened before then,
when you were at long last finished and knew
your longing and journeying are never through?

My reflection on that poem was: 'Be careful that this is not you, David. All this trouble for what? Now is a good time to rethink what your life is all about.' The notes continued: 'I wonder if, in a few years' time, I will reflect on my time as principal and wonder if it was like folding 1000 cranes - that I lived for extrinsic goals, for deadlines that in retrospect do not seem all that important? Will I consider that I was blinded by the lights in other people's eyes?'

ONE HOUR

While in the community I learnt to appreciate the truth in some of the Hasidic tales as reported by Martin Buber. One such tale is ascribed to Rabbi Moshe Leib. He said 'a human being who has not a single hour for his (her) own every day is not a human being'. Now here was a personal challenge. My mind set, my up-bringing, tells me that I am there to serve others, that enjoyment comes through ministrations and commitment. I am not sure if I can blame the Protestant ethic for this mind set, but I am sure that I bring this attitude to my work. When I do things for myself like having a hair cut, shopping, reading a book, meditating, it feels as if I am stealing time from my work. Even when on holidays or week-ends - and a significant part of this book has been written during these times - I have work to do. I see this as normal. I even feel fortunate that my job is so interesting and absorbing! But how can I continue this way? I can rationalise this by noting that unless space is created for renewal, it is difficult to imagine how there can be any freshness or receptiveness to others. I don't want to be a leader who, when asked a question, gives the same tired old answers over and over. People who show no freshness from reading or reflection bore me. But Paul Lacey wants me to go further than this. He wants me to enjoy a moment of meditation, not for the benefits that it might bring, but for itself. What kind of person would I become if I did this?

There is a Zen story that makes a similar point.

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen.

Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. 'It is over-full. No more will go in!'

‘Like this cup,’ Nan-in said, ‘you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?’ (Reps, 1957, 17)

Recently I stood for re-election to the Standing Committee of the Association of Heads of Independent Schools in Australia. I was unsuccessful. If this had happened earlier in my life I might well have looked for explanations as to why I had not been re-elected - may even have blamed certain circumstances for the event. This time I decided not to look for excuses and chose instead to feel, as I had been taught by the Quaker conference. I allowed myself to go internal, to feel what it was like to lose, to be passed over by my peers, to be placed after others on the ballot. What I attempted to do was to integrate my feeling with my thinking. I was upset. ‘So this is how my peers feel about me.’ On previous occasions of personal loss I would not have spoken openly about my feelings. However, this time I decided to say to some of my friends how disappointed I was, and how sad I was feeling. Their response, which could well have been mine to them on previous occasions, was to say, ‘Don’t worry about it, you should have been elected. I don’t understand why you weren’t’.

I found it interesting that my friends did not want to stay with my sadness. They wanted to hurry me past this point and have me think positively about tomorrow and even today. Yet it was at this time that Rabbi Moeshe Leib’s statement came back to me - ‘a human being who has not a single hour for his (her) own every day is not a human being.’ I needed to feel what it was like to be elected one year and not re-elected the next year. I wanted to feel the loss of role, the disappointment of failure, because this would extend my knowledge of myself and would assist me in the future when I would work with other people in similar situations. There is a sense in which, unless you have an inner life, you have no resources upon which to draw in times of need. Without an inner life you have neither the experience nor the energy to deal with the inner lives of other people.

Paul Lacey has published a book called *Running on Empty*. In this book he rephrases Rabbi Lieb’s expression as questions.

‘You who draw on resources of your inner lives to care for, comfort and teach others, what help will you be able to give, if you never refresh your inner lives?’
‘Are you so sure of your humanity, your inner resources, which you can take them for granted?’
‘What practical care do you show, in institutional terms, for the spiritual health of those you work with? Do you respect and protect the hour for oneself they, and you, need?’ (Lacey, 1993, 4)

In our group discussion of this personal hour, some members drew attention to the fact that they cannot begin the day without a cup of coffee. I know there are some who, as part of their religious communion, spend a half hour in a quiet time with scriptures and in prayer. Others spend time in meditation. All of this tends to be in private. What would happen if someone came to school and said ‘The next half hour is mine. Please do not disturb me.’ Could we accommodate this?

I remember Paul Lacey challenging us at the conference about not being first to school and not being last away. I remember laughing at his story, yet when I returned to school I noted that I was disappointed if I wasn’t the first in the office and was making an excuse if I wasn’t the last to leave. Even more disturbing was the fact that another senior member of staff was making a similar excuse when she left ‘early’ at 5.30pm. Where is the time for self renewal, for family, for friends? Running on empty is a definite possibility when one behaves in that way.

SILENCE

Not being a Quaker, one of the most surprising things that I discovered was the value of silence. At the conference Paul would read a poem, make a statement and then there was silence. There was no embarrassment at the silence. As I looked around the group, people had moved inside themselves while they were thinking, feeling and reflecting. Five minutes might pass, sometimes even longer, then someone would make a statement. The first statement may or may not elicit a response from another member of the group. Alternatively another person may make a statement. Members of the group did not have to say 'I hear what you say' and then make some supporting comment of 'That's interesting.' or 'That's good.' It was taken for granted that people were listening and did appreciate the honesty and the significance of the statement by the speaker. To me this was a new and exciting world. I found this a wonderful opportunity to understand more about myself, to integrate past events with present experiences and future aspirations. I also found this a community in which I could share, unselfconsciously, some of these revelations about myself.

What was most surprising about this experience was that it wasn't egocentric. Even though people often closed their eyes and breathed deeply, apparently isolating themselves from others, there was a real sense of a joined community. While the eyes were closed there was a sense of being part of a larger whole and that the other members of this whole were known intimately. What sense would a community like this make of those statements, 'eye ball to eye ball', or 'one on one'? The idea of not speaking directly and personally would not have occurred to them!

I was so excited by this discovery of the integration of personal space with community that I was determined to bring this back to Methodist Ladies' College. I have to report that I failed miserably with this task. I lacked the courage to carry it off effectively. It always seemed that there was a lot of resistance and of course practical issues to be dealt with first! When I set the agenda for meetings, I nominated time for reflection but I did not follow through and provide it. I was too aware that people were in 'action' mode, that they had only enough time for the work that we had to accomplish. In one school meeting the staff even articulated this feeling: 'We do not have time for being, only for doing.'

At the Quaker conference, one of the Hasidic tales we examined was *Silence and Speech*. It was written about the period of Napoleon. It too was gathered by Martin Buber.

A man had taken upon himself the discipline of silence and for three years had spoken no words save those of the Torah and of prayer. Finally the Yehudi sent for him: 'Young man,' he said, 'how is it that I do not see a single word of yours in the world of truth?' 'Rabbi,' said the other to justify himself, 'why should I indulge in the vanity of speech? Is it not better just to learn and to pray?' 'If you do that,' said the Yehudi, 'not a word of your own reaches the world of truth. He who only learns and prays is murdering the word of his own soul. What do you mean by "vanity of speech"? Whatever you have to say can be vanity or it can be truth. And now I am going to have a pipe and some tobacco brought for you to smoke tonight. Come to me after the Evening Prayer and I shall teach you how to talk.' They sat together the whole night. When morning came, the young man's apprenticeship was over.

What caught my attention in this tale was the communication that occurred just by sitting together. So my reflection looked at the idea of silence, its power and in my case its unused potential.

When other members of our group came to share their reflection on this tale, I was initially shocked at how different their reflections were and then saddened by their experience. One person described how she had been silenced by the education that she had received too. Another person said that his schooling had deadened his spirit of learning. Another person said, 'I have no wisdom to add to the world of truth.' Another person spoke about how life had gone out of the young person. What kind of educational system have we created that graduates could feel like that?

One of the crazy things I did on my return to school was to set up a room that was to be used by people who wanted to have some time by themselves. The room was established and yet no one used it. I was surprised by this fact until I reflected that I too had not used that room. Another idea I tried was to create a half hour on one day each week which was to be personal time for all staff. I set up a committee to explore the possibilities of this. The committee was enthusiastic. The staff as a whole saw merit in personal time. They were delighted that I was acknowledging the pressure under which they work. Under the guidance of the committee, we even got to try personal time on one day. We closed the whole school down for staff but we did not try to do it for students. That was to come next! We chose a lunch time for this experiment and had only a minimum staff on for supervision. Once again this was an idea that did not work. People said they would prefer to choose their personal times when they were in the mood. While the staff are used to my crazy ideas, these ones they felt were too much!

Upon reflection I now acknowledge that the best chance I have for introducing change is to model some changes within myself. It is interesting that, as I have been writing this section, I have got back in touch with the experiences I had with the Quakers. I am remembering and valuing time and commitment for writing and reflecting. I am once again resolved to personalise the time we have together as a staff. This time I won't try for an organisational change. Instead I will focus on some personal behaviour modification. I resolve not to be the first to school, to take time to have lunch in the staff room, to talk openly but not boringly about my need for some personal space and actually take some time for it. In addition we could try some organisational changes. One such change, which I know that staff would like, is the provision of mental health days for staff that are stressed, days that can be taken without having to claim that they are physically ill.

In response to my initiatives, one subject co-ordinator wrote:

I feel much more in tune with the notion of creating time for teachers in their working alone and together than for providing them with a personal space for half an hour. I want them to have space to reflect, learn, interact and 'to be' in their work. From this could follow personal growth as they become receptive listeners to themselves and to others.

WHAT IS OUR WORK?

If we can reconceptualise the nature of our work then the need to run on empty may be avoided. It is so easy for us to be busy. More than likely we will do the easy things first as that provides the satisfaction of having at least some things finished. But are these the important items? Will they have the most leverage? Senge defines leverage in organisations as 'small, well-focused

actions (which) can sometimes produce significant, enduring improvements, if they're in the right place.' (Senge, 1992, 64) A friend of mine has the expression 'keep the "think" to "work" ratio high'. Another person tells me to 'work smart'. But what does this mean in practice? Professor Judith Chapman has helped me make more sense of this dilemma. Speaking at an educational conference, Judith suggested that the work ethic of the twentieth century might be replaced in the twenty first century by the learning ethic. At present I conceive of work and learning as separate and try to do my work and then, in my non-existent spare time, I undertake my learning. As a university student, learning was my work. As a school principal, learning continues to be my work, yet I find it hard to give it the priority in my office.

To give more priority to my learning, and the learning of the staff, means that someone else has to undertake the tasks that will be left unattended. But there is no money available for increased staff. Around the world we are seeing a proportional decrease in the money being made available to education. Governments are being made smaller, the population is aging and this aging population is much more interested in money being spent on their health rather than on the education of youth who do not seem to appreciate it. Yet the task in education is becoming more complex and more demanding. Where will we find the resources? The need for ongoing professional development, for time for professional dialogue, must be met partly within the school day. How do we do this without increasing staff?

One way is to rethink how teachers spend their time. We are trying to do this at Methodist Ladies' College with varying degrees of success. Our major focus has been to question the assumption that all learning and teaching is to occur in a class setting of twenty to thirty students. We have introduced lectures to the whole year level of 300-plus students and staff in which all, staff and students, learn together. This has reduced preparation time for staff and introduced stimulating ideas from people outside the school. Two classes working together means that students enjoy two teachers, their different ideas and interactions and the teachers can specialise in different parts of the curriculum. As well it means that one teacher can be out of the classroom researching, or talking with a small group of students. One teacher wrote: 'I cannot tell you the joy I have working with another teacher.' Then there are times when the students do not have to be supervised on a class basis. Once the focus is on learning and not upon teaching, students take more responsibility and teachers find that they have time to meet, plan and learn too.

We are also trying to rethink the roles of teachers and of students. We have a situation where there are 2000-plus computers in the school, most of them privately owned as mobile computers. When we changed our internal mail system from CC Mail to Pegasus, it meant that every computer had to have new software added. People needed to be taught how to use the new software. We initially planned that the technical staff would gradually work through the school calling in computers, so many a day. This meant a long period of time would pass before everyone was back on the internal e-mail - an intolerable thought for those locked out. Employ more staff, was one suggestion and, in fact, additional staff were employed. This still didn't solve the problem because these technical staff had to deal with other issues like printers, networks, failures in different computers.

The greatest resource available to us that we had not really utilised was students. Why did we not think immediately of them or, even more importantly, why did they not immediately suggest this solution to us? Is our culture to ignore the skills of students? The reality is that many of our students would be delighted to help and have the technical skills and knowledge to

do it. We have created a culture in schools that does not provide us with a way of easily accessing this help. To state this more strongly, we have created a dependency culture with the adults as experts. To help us change our culture at Methodist Ladies' College, we gave two of our students scholarships to travel overseas to an American setting where the students do more than load software. In the chosen American schools, students run the network, repair computers, design and maintain the home page. It was easy to choose competent and worthy students. There were lots with the knowledge and skills. Our students returned, excited by what they had learnt, yet they found it very hard to make changes at Methodist Ladies' College. Staff regarded these young experts as students to whom real authority could not be given. We also provided a scholarship for an American student who had been a senior student manager, on networks and on the e-mail, to come to our school for three weeks. At the end of the first week the American student saw me and said: 'You have wasted your money bringing me out here. While I have been entertained, I haven't been able to do any work.'

I was upset by the relative failure of what seemed like an inspired idea. Why couldn't the staff have given students more space? Yet staff were taking their responsibility seriously. After all, they would be held responsible if the system failed. Yet would they be held responsible under a new student-staff partnership? As I thought about it more, I decided that the failure was more my fault. I had misread the school culture. I had seen it as more flexible, more open to change and more accommodating of initiative than it was. In retrospect I realised that the students needed a staff sponsor or advocate in our current culture. A staff member needed to accompany the students so that, when the students returned and began working on the computers and training other students in this role, the accompanying staff member could be working with our staff to help them understand the changing roles for students. In retrospect this makes more sense and fits with the idea of reculturing, a topic that I take up more fully in Chapter 9. A major plus with initiatives such as this one, had it worked, is that they would not only be self funding but that they would release staff time for other work including staff learning.

The reality is that in schools we need to be looking for some bold new initiatives that are cost-neutral. To find them we will need to take some risks. It is imperative that we create some time for thinking, dialogue and planning by our staff. We need to look for initiatives that will leverage this scarce resource. In that way we may be able to break out of our present practice of running on memory, which we end up doing because there is no time for planning alternative ways. We need to make the rhetoric about both students and teachers as 'learners and teachers together' a reality. Unless we can do this, we who lead will continue to run on empty, and many young people will continue to be silenced by their education.

LIVING COMMUNITY

Since my Quaker experience I have changed my educational goal from the 'intentional creation of a learning community' to the 'intentional creation of a living and learning community'. I wish to place a greater emphasis on our living together, our sharing, our interdependence and our individual lives within that community. Education is more than academic learning. It includes four essential elements: learning to learn; life skills; personal growth; community experience.

A family community, for example, has meals together, shares tasks and responsibilities, spends time together in relaxed settings, goes on outings and pays attention to individual happenings such as birthdays. Why can't we accommodate some of this within our structure?

As a school we need to find new ways of celebrating our life together. The church with its seasons and feast days suggests to us that we could have days and events that have particular meaning for us as a community.

Such a family image will not please all. Some people choose to live alone. Others are very private. It is not being asserted that staff must make the school community their life. But it is asserted that what is expected of an adult in a school situation is more than coming to a class period and 'teaching a subject'. Real participation in community is important.

A look over the horizon in education might well see schools as dramatically different places. Their task will go beyond the present narrow confines of academic curriculum and the staff of these community centres will have new specialists including doctors, physiotherapists, dieticians, religious leaders, sports and music specialists as well as teachers and social workers.

THE POTLATCH

Within the Quaker conference, Paul introduced us to the story of an Indian Potlatch of the Kwakiuti Indians, as described by the anthropologist Ruth Benedict:

A chief wants to prove that he has more riches than anyone else, so he invites all his rivals to a potlatch, a giant bonfire. They all settle around the fire and the chief says, 'the fire needs more fuel' and throws on one of his most valued possessions, a canoe. The fire flares up and the heat gets intense but the chief is not satisfied. 'It is still too chilly,' so he tosses on a couple more canoes and a few buffalo robes. His rivals are pretty uncomfortable with the heat but they have to continue to sit close to the fire, to show that it is not much of a blaze. And so it goes, until, over the hours, he consumes everything of value that he owns, knowing that the size of the fire, the heat, the discomfort of his rivals will be remembered as the measure of his wealth and greatness.

I found the story very distressing and had some trouble moving to it as a metaphor. The thought of all that waste of resources going up in flames particularly when, at the end, all is consumed! How will his people cope? Then there was the foolishness of the chief worrying what his fellow chiefs were thinking of him. One has to live in one's own mind, not in the mind of others. As we sat in silence at the end of the story, I had a feeling of immense sadness.

Paul interrupted our thinking with the simple statement: 'You are the chief in that story.' 'Not so', I heard myself say quietly. Paul said that we can read this as a story of professional burn-out. He reminded us that we had told him how we were determined to work harder and longer than anyone else, that we responded to practically every request without demur, that we gave our all. What is more, by doing this we were inviting others to burn both their work canoes and learning clothes when we set an example of commitment that our fellow staff had to match. When you have burned up all that you have, you will be running on empty.

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