

Learning Innovation at Death's Door

Tod Bolsinger

The chart said, *Age: 26*. I gulped.

That was my age, too.

He was lying in a hospital bed laboring to breathe while the monitor showed his heart steadily slowing down. His mother read the psalms aloud at the foot of his bed. Every few lines she would say in a strong voice, "It's okay, darling, you can go. Jesus is waiting for you. I love you, but it's okay. You can go."

Quietly, I slipped into the room. The mother smiled weakly when she glanced at my name badge. "Are you the chaplain?" "I'm the chaplain *intern*," I said, hoping that she wouldn't be disappointed. I was called to be with you and your son." She nodded for me to sit down.

Over the next hour or so, the mother and I sat in that awkward but holy silence that marks a vigil. I prayed silently; she read aloud. She continued to will her son, whose body was so ravaged from the effects of the AIDS virus, to release into a loving and healing eternity. Finally, the monitor registered that her son had indeed done so.

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Reflective Practice: Formation and Supervision in Ministry

ISSN 2325-2847 (print)* ISSN 2325-2855 (online)

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One beat later, it registered with her. “No!” She screamed, “Come back—I’m not ready for you to go!”

I stood there as her cries turned to sobs, turned to gentle weeping, turned to a deep sigh. I had been trained to stand still. To pray silently. To be present. To fight back the anxiety that wanted to comfort with platitudes. I calmed myself. Finally, she looked up at me. “Thank you for being here,” she said. We joined hands and gently touched the young man who was once the little boy she had held in her arms. And I prayed for us all.

I was barely three weeks into an intensive summer quarter of clinical pastoral education training, and I had just experienced my first person dying. Before the summer was out, I would be with five more, three on the same day. I was a year away from my seminary graduation and two years away from my ordination, and I believed at that time that what I was doing in that hospital was becoming equipped to offer crisis care to people in the future congregation that I hoped to pastor.

Years later, when I held the naked body of one of my elders as he died in my arms, held the hand of a three-year-old child who was clutching a teddy bear as he was preparing to have a brain tumor removed, and held my Bible and spoke trembling words to comfort a community of young adults who were burying their friend and her son in the same grave, I would look back on the training of CPE and give thanks for what I had learned. Even more, those who have done CPE training know that the most challenging aspect of an intensive in pastoral crisis chaplaincy, however, is actually not learning how to minister to others in those situations but what you learn about yourself from peer and supervisor feedback, structured reflection assignments, and robust group discussion.

What most seminarians discover in a good CPE experience or an internship with an experienced pastor is that even more lasting than the pastoral skills they learn about entering into a ministry situation are the fruits of the personal reflection honed through the writing of verbatims, the discussions with a supervisor, and the deconstruction with peers.¹ It’s not just the work that changes you but also the group. But what I wouldn’t realize for years after was that, in the middle of that hard summer facing both the reality of death and the even more painful reality of my own insecurities and fears, I was being prepared for an even more difficult calling than helping people face grief.

Today, I am a senior administrator in a large seminary, an organizational leadership consultant, and a researcher and professor of organizational change leadership. What I didn't know almost half my life ago was that as I was standing in that hospital room learning how to help a mother face the loss of a son, I was also learning the core skills for helping whole congregations or faculties of higher education face and address the painful reality that the church and institution they love needs to change or *it will die*.

In my work as a consultant, I am struck by how overwhelmed many leaders feel when facing the rapid pace of cultural change and the requisite need for an innovative response. To be clear, many avoid these moments and fall back into the unending tasks that can easily fill a day. And more than once a pastor or executive director has whispered to me, "Seminary didn't prepare me for this."

As Christendom in the West gives way and Christianity loses its place of privilege in the culture, more and more church leaders are needing to find new ways of being the church for an increasingly unchurched culture.² Seminaries and church councils alike are feeling the need to not only pass on the faith and the traditions, cultivate formation for faithfulness and spiritual vitality, and teach the skills of biblical exegesis, ethical discernment, and theological thinking but also, increasingly, to equip faith leaders with an entrepreneurial capacity, innovative thinking, and creative collaboration as a way to respond to a world of cultural disruption. In an era of disruptive startups, there is hope that a new kind of innovative, entrepreneurial Christian leader will emerge to bring a resurgence of Spirit-filled energy and hope to a moribund church in exile that lacks the capacity even to imagine let alone to see new possibilities.

Much is being written about how education in general and higher and theological education in particular must develop the perception and the capacity to wisely innovate in matters of curriculum, teaching, and scholarship,³ but in this essay I want to suggest that—if intentionally reframed—there is already much within our current ministry training practices to cultivate that "spirit of adventure" in Christian leaders with entrepreneurial and *adaptive* capacity. In short, the kind of capacities that have long been part of CPE training and field education, if reframed for a different "pain point," have within them far more potential to form entrepreneurial and innovative leaders than we have imagined.

LEARNING AND LOSS

Ronald Heifetz and Marty Linsky have written, “People don’t resist change; they resist loss.”⁴ And indeed, the very heart of innovative, adaptive thinking is that *adaptive leadership requires learning and results in loss*. Since adaptive leadership and innovation are required when “best practices” and the technical fixes of experts no longer work, then innovative, adaptive leadership begins when a leader can admit that she doesn’t have a ready answer and can prepare herself and her community for the inevitable, necessary, and painful losses of status, identity, and cherished preferences needed to accomplish their missional objective.⁵ As Heifetz puts it, “Leadership on adaptive challenges generates loss. Learning is often painful. One person’s innovation can cause another person to feel incompetent, betrayed, or irrelevant.”⁶

Once we understand that leading change requires helping an organization and its people to face and adapt to loss in order to address their biggest challenges, then we can immediately recognize the great capacity that is already present within most ministerial skill sets. Every pastor who has served more than a few years has had to sit with another person as they faced the crushing darkness and grief of an unimaginable future without a loved one—*every* pastor. Along with paramedics and nurses, pastors are usually the persons in a community who have been face to face with the most death, loss, and grief. This, of course, is why most denominations insist that every seminarian have at least some experience in chaplaincy—often in a hospital and very often right at the point of pain and crisis.

But what is also true is that pastors who can gently, capably, and caringly guide individuals through the grief of loss and the change of life that loss has thrust upon them often feel overwhelmed by the organizational task at hand, the corporate anxiety permeating the “emotional field,”⁷ the very real potential for failure, and the sense of their inability to walk with an organization through a similar loss and grief that a changing world is bringing upon them, their ministry, and their mission.

WHY LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS FAIL

In 2014, McKinsey & Company wrote a report on their research on the failure of leadership development programs in both academic and corporate settings.⁸ Their two leading critiques focused on the tendency of lead-

ership programs to overlook the leadership context and to “decouple reflection from real work.” In field education, apprenticeship work, and clinical pastoral education, both of these critiques are resolved in the very structure of the learning. When an intern writes verbatims, discusses case studies, or debriefs experiences with an intentionally academic and self-reflective posture, learning follows. According to Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal, “Experience, one often hears, is the best teacher, but that is true only if you reflect on it and extract its real lessons.”⁹ When that reflection includes an emphasis on self-awareness, strategizing for future experiences, and learning from mistakes and failures, wisdom is developed. This kind of learning is central to both the pastoral task and the development of innovative capacity. Astro Teller, the head of X (formerly Google X), runs the “Moonshot” projects of Google that are exploring the development of new technologies such as Google Glass and the Google driverless car. For Teller, the key to innovation is to fearlessly focus on real and really big problems and to “run at all the hardest parts of the problems first.”¹⁰ Innovation, Teller would remind us, usually comes through lots of experimentation—and failure. We don’t often think of internships and CPE units as places for experimentation, but just as Atul Gawande reminds us that surgeons are trained through cutting on human beings, we actually learn our way in ministry by *practicing* on people.¹¹ And that awareness alone should both focus our attention and deepen the effectiveness of our learning.

The problem, of course, is that in most schools field education requirements and CPE training consists of one or two courses in a much larger and mostly standard academic curriculum that is weighted far more to theory than to practice. The field education, internship, or apprenticeship requirement is dwarfed by the requirement to read thousands of pages of theoretical content, listen to hundreds of hours of lectures, and write numerous papers that may or may not be connected to a sociocultural context, require any self-reflection, or address any of the challenges that ministry leaders face every day—especially helping their own people face necessary *losses*.

But the key here is that in the same way that the self-awareness that leads a chaplain intern to realize that his desire to quote the Scriptures to a grieving mother is more about his own anxiety than because the mother needs to hear them, the leader who is trying to bring change will not be able to see any new opportunities until she is able to recognize the fixed limitations of her current mental models because of her own anxieties and fears.

This is profoundly common when the leader is overwhelmed by current circumstances.

In Isaiah 43:18–19, the God of the Exodus says to the people of God in exile, “Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old, I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?” The answer, of course, is no. They couldn’t see the new thing because they were both overwhelmed by their current exilic state and trapped by memories of their past. Three chapters later, Isaiah will call the people of God to a new remembering of what God had done and to faithful obedience to that God, but the prophet must first command the people to stop looking back or they will be unable to see the new thing that God is doing in their midst, even in captivity in Babylon.

Rabbi and family systems therapist Edwin Friedman articulates it this way: “When any relationship system is imaginatively gridlocked, it cannot get free simply through more thinking about the problem. Conceptually stuck systems cannot become unstuck simply by trying harder. For a fundamental reorientation to occur, that *spirit of adventure* which optimizes serendipity and which enables new perceptions beyond the control of our thinking processes must happen first.”¹²

Overcoming imaginative gridlock. Developing a spirit of adventure. How can we develop more of these capabilities? Let me offer three lessons that most of us learned in our early supervised ministry experiences that, if leveraged more fully, could lead to the development of more innovative change leaders.

1. Differentiation: How to be *in* the chaos but not *of* it
2. Empathy: The shortcut to innovative solutions to real problems
3. Relationships: The team you need to develop resilience

Differentiation: How to Be in the Chaos but Not of It

Entering a room filled with grieving people is not easy, not even for a pastor or chaplain trained for such moments. The swirl of emotions, the unspoken questions, and the disorienting bewilderment can feel debilitating. Entering a room filled with faculty facing consecutive years of dwindling enrollment and shrinking budgets, or a church council meeting coming to grips with giving shortfalls and necessary changes to beloved staff or meaningful programs, is equally fraught with engulfing emotions. Anxiety is contagious, and whether in a hospital room, faculty lounge, or a church

council board room, the longing for survival and the reality of mortality of either a beloved person or community can quickly become overwhelming.

For Friedman, the most effective response to the emotional riptide of anxiety caused either by an immediate crisis or by a larger leadership moment is the “spirit of adventure” that enables new perceptions, creativity, and courage. This spirit of adventure is the result of a psychological separation from “surrounding emotional processes” that enables a broadening of perspective and ability to see or hear things differently than others in the organizational system, a trait that is even more necessary for innovation than the capacity to generate new ideas or “think outside the box.”¹³ This emotional separation while remaining in relationship with others in the system is what the Bowenian school of psychological thought calls “self-differentiation,”¹⁴ and for Friedman this is the core attribute of innovative leaders who persist in the face of the understandable resistance that is present when people are anxious about loss.

As Friedman puts it, “The key . . . is the leader’s own self-differentiation, by which I mean his or her capacity to be a non-anxious presence, a challenging presence, a well-defined presence, and a paradoxical presence. Differentiation is not about being coercive, manipulative, reactive, pursuing or invasive, but being rooted in the leader’s own sense of self rather than focused on that of his or her followers.”¹⁵ For Friedman, the capacity to stand in a room of grieving people and be a calm, comforting presence, to lead a memorial service with both attentiveness and strength, and to manage one’s own anxiety in order to keep from falling into shallow clichés is the same capacity needed to be able to take risks and lead people into the unknown of new ministry changes that could possibly result in loss.¹⁶

Empathy: The Shortcut to Innovative Solutions to Real Problems

If there is a core pastoral counseling skill, it would have to be the ability to listen with empathy to another person’s life and experience, to offer the care of presence that attunes so deeply to others that our brains literally begin to function in such a way that “we can experience others as if from within their own skin, as well as from within our own.”¹⁷ I want to reframe *empathy* as more than a traditional category of pastoral functioning; it is also as a means of developing innovative leaders for a church that is in desperate need of new thinking and a new type of leadership.

Along with the growing awareness of how emotional intelligence enables leaders to build highly effective teams imbued with the trust that allows them to function collaboratively is the growing recognition that empathy is more than a “soft skill.” Empathy is being acknowledged as a capacity that gives a company an innovative, competitive advantage. A *New York Times Magazine* article titled “What Google Learned from Its Quest to Build the Perfect Team” revealed that the digital behemoth known for mining big data to understand the keys to launching successful products discovered that the keys to successful teams lay in something much more tangible: How well team members listened to each other. “The behaviors that create psychological safety—conversational turn-taking and empathy—are part of the same unwritten rules we often turn to, as individuals, when we need to establish a bond. And those human bonds matter as much at work as anywhere else. In fact, they sometimes matter more.”¹⁸

But what is even more revolutionary for us to consider as we think about developing innovative leaders is that empathy is not just a means of caring for people, developing effective teams, and demonstrating cross-cultural sensitivity in a rapidly globalizing world¹⁹; empathy also *cultivates the capacity to develop new ideas that make people’s lives better*. When we learn, for example, that when we “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep” we aren’t just caring for people but are also enabling growth and inspiring acts of change, it is a short step to seeing empathy as a “hack” or shortcut to new expressions of ministry that are focused on real needs of real people that we are now far more inspired and motivated to achieve—an insight that product designers have already discovered.

Innovation researcher Dan Kanzler writes, “If I had to pick one skill that’s fundamental for innovators, . . . it would be empathy, because of the way it allows us to see things from another person’s perspective. In other words, ‘How can I, as an innovator, help fill gaps and needs in people’s lives?’”²⁰ For Michaela O’Donnell Long, empathy is a capacity born of intentional *practice* and is the “starting point for designing valuable products and processes.”²¹

In their article in the *Australasian Medical Journal*, Deana McDonagh and Joyce Thomas identify empathy as the critical skill for innovative designers for “more effective product outcomes.” By effective, the authors mean that products that are designed for users’ needs lead not only to higher profits but also to the greater overall well-being of their users.²² This finding

has now become standard business innovation wisdom; note that the recent surge of Amazon to compete with Google and Apple as the world's most profitable companies is attributed to Amazon's focus on users' needs rather than on solving hard technical problems.²³ Empathy is the attribute most attested to in "human-centered design" of the most innovative products.²⁴

It soon becomes evident that the key skill set for helping resistant congregants deal with the losses that come through change as well as for coming up with creative ideas that will energize those changes depend on a skill that is highly developed in many religious leaders. For those of us charged with developing pastors and practitioners who can care for the vulnerable, it may be heartening to know that those same skills may someday lead to innovative responses and creative communities that will make those vulnerable lives a bit better.

Relationships: The Team You Need to Develop Resilience

If the differentiation learned in a hospital room and the empathy cultivated through pastoral counseling enable leaders to stay calm in the midst of the anxiety of change, identify the pain points that need addressing, and develop innovative and caring responses, then relationships that are cultivated in ministry settings could be an even more important component to cultivating innovative leaders. Although the leadership literature is replete with examples of the importance of highly functioning, healthy teams²⁵ and the necessity of relationships for coming up with truly innovative ideas,²⁶ relationships also provide the critical support that allows a leader to persevere through the inevitable failures and resistance that come from attempting innovative change. As Harry Mills and Mark Dombreck note, "The quality of your relationships with other people influences how emotionally resilient you can be in the face of an emotional or physical crisis."²⁷

One of the most powerful aspects of any good field education experience is the combination of both peer and supervisorial feedback that not only aids self-awareness and learning but enables a young leader to experience the power of the support and challenge of a group. Indeed, at Fuller Theological Seminary, a complete revision of the MA and MDiv curriculum led to the development of vocation formation groups that function as part of *five* different courses. These groups are mentor-led and also feature peer reflection in integration courses and apprenticeships (field education).

The vocation formation groups provide not only a setting for students to participate in corporate vocational discernment and the development of spiritual practices to support their vocations but also give students an opportunity to experience the necessity and power of utilizing both peer and mentor relationships as a normal part of the ministry experience and even as a necessary part of the life of a leader. Ronald Heifetz compares a leader's relationships to the kind of garb one needs to survive foul weather: "No one would live in Boston without owning a winter coat. But countless people think that they can exercise leadership without partners."²⁸

Learning Innovation at the Place of Pain

In a rapidly changing world, the necessity and development of innovative, adaptive leaders is a compelling and critical task, especially for church and religious non-profit organizations in a world where the passing of Christendom has exacerbated the decline in church membership, religious devotion, and the support of religiously affiliated institutions. While there are many good and compelling reasons to consider the formative approaches of the business world that proliferate in leadership development literature, it would be short-sighted and an act of ingratitude to all of our supervisors and mentors if we missed the connections that are being made in other fields between emotional intelligence and innovation leadership. The good, difficult, soul-searching and vulnerable experience of self-reflection, feedback, experiments, and failures that are part of field education, clinical pastoral education, and apprenticeships are not only tried and true for forming caring pastors and practitioners but also—if reframed and reintroduced with a change of perspective, the literature on adaptive leadership, and the insights of innovative companies—rich opportunities for developing adaptive and innovative capacities. Self-differentiation, empathy, and relationships are not only necessary for ministry; they are also attributes for innovation.

If reframed and presented in new ways, the supervised training of pastors for pastoral care in a church office or a hospital room will not only make our learners able to walk people through the change and grief of life but will also develop their capacity to walk whole organizations into new, innovative iterations of faithful mission.

NOTES

- 1 Katherine R. B. Jankowski et al., "Change in Pastoral Skills, Emotional Intelligence, Self-Reflection, and Social Desirability across a Unit of CPE", *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy* 15, no. 2 (2008): 3–22. For one example of such learning, see C. Roberts and P. Stark, "Readiness for Self-Directed Change in Professional Behaviours: Factorial Validation of the Self-Reflection and Insight Scale, *Medical Education* 42, no. 11 (2008): 1054–63. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2923.2008.03156.x.
- 2 See Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).
- 3 Louise Hainline et al., "Changing Students, Faculty, and Institutions in the Twenty-First Century," *Association of American Colleges & Universities*, Dec. 29, 2014, www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/changing-students-faculty-and-institutions-twenty-first-century; Libby Nelson, "The Struggling Seminaries," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 29, 2013, www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/03/29/luther-seminary-makes-deep-cuts-faculty-and-staff-amid-tough-times-theological; Mohammed Khalifa Al Mubarak, "Education System Needs to Adapt to a Fast-Changing World," *The National*, Feb. 23, 2014, www.thenational.ae/education-system-needs-to-adapt-to-a-fast-changing-world-1.473481; David M. Kirby, "Changing the Landscape of Higher Education." *The Huffington Post*, Nov. 21, 2016, www.huffingtonpost.com/david-m-kirby/changing-the-landscape-of-b_13127826.html; Samantha Cole, "5 Big Ways Education Will Change By 2020," *Fast Company*, March 11, 2015, www.fastcompany.com/3043387/5-big-ways-education-will-change-by-2020.
- 4 Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive Through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002), 11.
- 5 Heifetz and Linsky write, "Adaptive change stimulates resistance because it challenges people's habits, beliefs, and values. It asks them to take a loss, experience uncertainty, and even express disloyalty to people and cultures. Because adaptive change forces people to question and perhaps redefine aspects of their identity, it also challenges their sense of competence. Loss, disloyalty, and feeling incompetent: That's a lot to ask. No wonder people resist." Ronald A. Heifetz and Marty Linsky, as quoted in Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains*, 135.
- 6 Ronald A. Heifetz, *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School, 2009), locs. 419–20, Kindle.
- 7 As Edwin Friedman notes, "Institutions, I was coming to see, could be conceptualized as emotional fields—environments of force that, for all their influence over people's thinking processes, were, like magnetic fields or gravitational fields, largely invisible to the naked eye." Edwin H. Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve: Leadership in the Age of the Quick Fix* (New York: Church Publishing, 2007), locs. 348–50, Kindle.
- 8 Pierre Gurdjian, Thomas Halbeisen, and Kevin Lane, "Why Leadership Development Programs Fail," McKinsey & Company, www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/leadership/why-leadership-development-programs-fail. See also Michael Beer, Magnus Finnström, and Derek Schrader, "Why Leadership Training Fails—And What to Do About It," *Harvard Business Review* (Oct. 2016), hbr.org/2016/10/why-leadership-training-fails-and-what-to-do-about-it; Peter Bregman, "Why So Many Leadership Programs Ultimately Fail," *Harvard Business Review* (July 10, 2013), hbr.org/2013/07/why-so-many-leadership-program.html

- 9 Lee G. Bolman and Terrence E. Deal, *How Great Leaders Think: The Art of Reframing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2014), 12.
- 10 See Astro Teller's TED Talk, *The Unexpected Benefit of Celebrating Failure*, Feb. 2016, TED, https://www.ted.com/talks/astro_teller_the_unexpected_benefit_of_celebrating_failure/transcript.
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- 15 Friedman, *A Failure of Nerve*, locs. 4171–81, Kindle.
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- 17 Michael Carroll, "How Empathy Paves the Way to Innovation," *Fast Company*, Nov. 11, 2012, <https://www.fastcompany.com/3002832/how-empathy-paves-way-innovation>.
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- 19 Daniel Goleman's revolutionary work on emotional intelligence led to the awareness of empathy as a requisite leadership skill, but for Goleman empathy is almost always framed as a way for leaders to build good teams, demonstrate cross-cultural sensitivity, and retain talent, not necessarily to generate innovative ideas and initiatives. See Daniel Goleman, *Leadership: The Power of Emotional Intelligence* (More Than Sound, 2013), locs. 472–73, Kindle.
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- 25 Patrick Lencioni, *The Advantage: Why Organization Health Trumps Everything Else in Business* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012).
- 26 "Look beneath the surface of almost anything produced by an organization that is new, useful, and even moderately complex, and you'll almost certainly discover it came from multiple hands, not the genius of some solitary inventor." Linda A. Hill, Greg Brandeau, Emily Truelove, and Kent Lineback, *Collective Genius: The Art and Practice of Leading Innovation* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2014), locs. 291–02, Kindle. See also Ed Catmull, *Creativity, Inc.: Overcoming the Unseen Forces that Stand in the Way of True Inspiration* (New York: Random House, 2014), especially his discussion of how the Pixar "Braintrust" helped develop some of the most creative animated feature films.
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