

# Courageous Conversation – Widening the Lens

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Seamus Heaney describes our lives as

'a hurry through which known and strange things pass ... and catch the heart off guard and blow it open' (Heaney, *Opened Ground: Poems 1966-1996*, 444)

When you think of what we do day in day out – of what we call normal, for me at least its not so much the discreet one to one encounters that 'catch my heart off guard and blow it open' as the cumulative effect of the debris of doing what I do day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year that needs sifting and reflection.

In a poem called *Days*, Billy Collins writes of such cumulative effect:

Each [day] *is* a gift, no doubt,  
Mysteriously placed in your waking hand  
Or set upon your forehead  
Moments before you open your eyes.

Today begins cold and bright,  
The ground heavy with snow  
And the thick masonry of ice,  
The sun glinting off the turrets of clouds.

Through the calm eye of the window  
everything is in its place  
but so precariously that  
this day might be resting somehow  
on the one before it,  
all the days of the past stacked high  
like the impossible tower of dishes  
entertainers used to build on stage.

No wonder you find yourself  
perched on the top of a tall ladder  
hoping to add one more.  
Just one more Wednesday  
you whisper,  
then holding your breath,

place this cup on yesterday's saucer  
without the slightest clink.

Billy Collins (2002) *Sailing Alone Around the Room*, New York: Random House

When I first came across that poem I wanted to hug Billy Collins for offering me, what Romanov calls, 'the laying on of ears' (Romanov). To my mind he could well have been commissioned to write that poem with palliative care staff in mind. Days resting 'precariously' on those before them. Experiences 'stacked high like impossible towers of dishes'. And that apt image of being 'perched on the top of a tall ladder' hoping to add, what we consider, just one more ordinary day on top of yesterday without the slightest clink. When you stop to think of what we do as a matter of course, what we regard as 'simply doing our job', it beggars belief that we manage to build *most* of our tomorrows on *most* of our yesterdays 'without the slightest clink' when an almighty crash could well have been predicted.

And so when it comes to reflective practice, the question is not 'what on earth is there to reflect upon?' but rather 'where on earth would we start?' Just think of an average week with its

- Work with patients
- Support for families
- Care for staff and volunteers
- Vigils at death beds
- Creating and leading rituals
- Corridor, car park, garden & cafe encounters
- Contributions to ethics groups, nurses training etc
- Fostering community among the workforce

not to mention the impact of the work on ourselves, our interaction with chaplaincy and MDT colleagues, and the things we never seem to get round to doing.

### **Where to start?**

One of the things that strikes me so often when I supervise chaplains is that faced with such a varied and heavy workload, it can be very difficult to get the session started or to identify the supervisory focus or reflective issue not because chaplains don't do anything or are unreflective but simply because 1) they don't know where to start and 2) because in choosing to explore one aspect of their work they realise they won't be able to explore another aspect which takes them back to 1) they don't know where to start. And so I spend a lot of my time in supervision, trying to help people sift through their work and experiences so as to be able to use the time and space efficiently and effectively.

Reflective practice is a very broad area and one with which I am sure you will be very familiar. In preparing this presentation I have really struggled to know how to pitch it so as to be of any interest and use to you. In the end what I have decided to do is

- 1) to highlight some of the factors which keep reflective practice from being anything but courageous or visionary
- 2) to identify some of the distinctive hallmarks of reflective practice appropriate for people like you or I working in spiritual care
- 3) and finally to engage with you in some live theological reflection arising out of the conference theme – ‘Sustaining the Vision, Pastoral Theology and Reflective Practice in Spiritual Care’

But to kick us off, could you buzz with those around you for a few minutes in response to these questions:

- Is reflective practice a turn on or turn off for you?
- In what ways do you reflect: journaling, verbatim, supervision etc?
- If you receive supervision or belong to a reflective group what adjectives would you use to describe it?

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*‘What I see tires me and what I don’t see worries me’*

*Madame de Sevigny on sightseeing*

I have called this talk ‘Courageous Conversation – Widening the Lens’ quite simply because, too often what passes for reflective practice and supervision is anything but courageous in content or panoramic in focus but rather timid and insipid, blinkered and myopic. Take supervision as an example. For much of my life as a priest and a therapist what I have been offered under the guise of ‘supervision’ has had little that was **super** or **visionary** about it. Good though most of it has been, thank God, it should really have been called **micro**-vision. Why, because the lens was narrowly focused on some detail or other of my work that either puzzled me or troubled my supervisor rather than on a panoramic view of the wider horizon and context of who I am and how I work. Take this to the next level and place that reflection or supervision within the context of the worker-line manager relationship, the lens of enquiry has usually favoured the interests of the organization (expressed in the focus on issues of competence, performance or goals) to the neglect of the person who inhabits the role, who they are, what brings them to life in the work, what makes them die inside.

I want to argue that anything worthy of the name *supervision* needs to attend to its own aetymology. Just as a supermarket offers more than a mini-market so *supervision* that is true to its name should offer a broader or super view, a fuller or better picture. It should be a place where things can be seen in wider and greater perspective. A place where the vocabulary and syntax are of the vision and balance necessary to sustain the well being both of the worker and of the organization. Why, because what we bring to our work is the intentional use of the self and there is ‘a

clear need for that self to be listened to and cared for in supportive and challenging ways.' (McCormack in Benefiel, M, & Holton, G., (2010), *The Soul of Supervision: Integrating Practice and Theory*, New York, Morehouse Publishing p 27)

## Factors mitigating against Courage and Breadth

That reflective practice is neither courageous nor visionary in outlook is hardly surprising when we consider the range of factors which mitigate against it. For example, when reflecting alone, whether in the privacy of one's own head, or with a pen and journal, it is almost inevitable, no matter how self aware we are that blind spots and hobby horses, overestimation or underestimation of our abilities and an inability to see situations in their multi-dimensional complexity can limit clear sightedness.

And when the context for reflection extends beyond self to be shared with another or with a group, a whole host of other factors can come into play and explicitly or implicitly sabotage our best aspirations. We would be foolish for example to presume that fear is not present when people take the risk of exposing their work to each other. The person presenting their work may be fearful of being judged, found to be wanting in some way or another, or of simply not being understood in what they have brought for reflection. Similarly group members can be fearful of having nothing to say or offer in response, of coming over as dull or seen to have less insight than other members of the group.

Furthermore when reflecting with peers, there may be an unconscious and implicit understanding that when push comes to shove, maintaining friendships or protecting the ability to work together is of a higher value than honestly naming what is seen and heard with the result that voices are silenced and eyes shaded. In such situations safe generalisations are proffered and identification with the issue under discussion, rather than reflection in its wider sense becomes the currency. When this happens, courage and vision can go out the window and collusion and avoidance move in and claim squatters rights in the life of the group.

'Any critically reflective effort we undertake can only be accomplished with the help of critical friends. We need others to serve as critical mirrors who highlight our assumptions for us and reflect them back to us in unfamiliar, surprising and disturbing ways. We also need our critical friends to provide emotional sustenance'.

Mezirow 'The critical theory of adult learning and education', *Adult Education*, 32:3-24

It is a paradox to me that one of the more recent challenges to courageous reflection stems from the current trend to promote reflective practice among chaplains and those who provide spiritual care. While that trend has led some of our number to integrate personal and professional personas, inner spirituality and practical skills,

some people now come to reflective groups 'because they have been told it would be good for them, or its team policy, or required by the Knowledge, Skills, Framework, by AHPCC or some other worthy body and do not want to commit professional suicide by being left behind even though they have no expectations, no desire to invest in reflective processes and are certainly not up for changing their practice as a result. Such people typically bring success stories to reflective groups or, situations which they have already worked out in their own heads or on a good day, pastoral encounters which leave minimal room for comment by others.

And who is to blame them, for buried deep within what I would certainly uphold as the very worthwhile promotion of reflective practice, is the hidden, unnamed and unchallenged assumption that everyone is capable of reflection, open to the insights that flow from it and, as a result, able to implement changes in their practice. And this, I have discovered to my cost, is simply not true.

It has been my experience, that even when all the conditions conducive to good reflection have been met – safety, hospitality, confidentiality, uninterrupted space etc. - some practitioners (chaplains included) simply do not have the inner spiritual or psychological resilience – that secure sense of being sustained from the inside – to creatively engage with the process; for instance, to receive feedback as just that – feedback – without hearing it as criticism, or to hear group members speak of the impact that the story they have related is having on them without feeling personally responsible or dissolving inside. And therein lies a huge challenge if reflective practice is to be normative rather than simply for those who are, by personality or temperament, that way inclined.

For me, this touches on the whole question of the formation of chaplains which, although related, is not exhausted by the term 'training'. In contrast to the world of counselling where, in order to become a counsellor one has to have sat as a client and intentionally worked at acquiring insight, it amazes me that you or I can practice as chaplains and spiritual carers without ever having had to expose our souls and spirits, our sense of meaning and purpose to the loving eye of a spiritual companion. Of course many of us do just that but the fact that it is optional and not a requirement of our formation is I think questionable and impacts on the quality of reflective practice among us a body.

### **Hallmarks of courageous conversations which widen the lens**

Having briefly outlined some of the contributory factors which can get in the way, let me now highlight some of the hallmarks of courageous and wide-eyed patterns of reflection. Since reflective practice and supervision is still fairly new on the pastoral scene at least in the UK, what often happens is that not knowing where to look, chaplains and people in ministry uncritically adopt models whose genesis and context arise elsewhere, from nursing, from counselling, from business management. What I want to argue is that what is needed, if we are to sustain

ourselves from the inside, is that we take the very best of what is 'out there' and add into the mix our own distinctive concerns as people of spirit and come up with a bespoke model for ourselves. So what follows is the beginnings of my doctoral research and very much work in progress so your comments and feedback would be very welcome.

### **Vocational**

In addition to what every other caring group attends to in reflective practice, I think a bespoke tailored approach needs to take seriously that what we do is not just a job but a vocation – a response to a sense of calling.

Speaking of vocation, Rowan Williams says:

'Here at least, whatever the cost, I am in the truth. Anything else would be playing, messing around with a tame reality I could control, and reality is not like that. Vocation is, you could say, what's left when all the games have stopped. It's that elusive residue that we are here to discover, and to help one another to discover.'

*Rowan Williams*

By extension, reflection is courageous and far-seeing when it permits and invites exploration of how that vocation is being lived and practiced. Reflection, in whatever form it takes, understood as a place where the games have stopped and the truth can be told, offers an invaluable opportunity for rediscovering the glory of our calling and for promoting deeper integration of freedom and identity.

### **Contemplative**

In a culture plagued by the Gods of efficiency and productivity, reflective practice is courageous when it looks beneath the busy-ness of my mind and daily activities to the spiritual practices which underpin my life and sustain me from the inside. Prayer, meditation, times of being fed by holy reading, or holy looking, by silence and nourishing spiritual conversation. The contemplative character of reflection is engendered when

'the body – that house of voices –  
.. puts down its metal tongs, its needle or its pen  
To stare into the distance,  
To listen to all its names being called  
Before bending again to its labor'.

'The wires of the Night' in Billy Collins (2002) *Sailing Alone Around the Room*,  
New York: Random House p 121/122

### **Vision-focused**

As a place where I attend to my vision, reflective practice asks me to name the core beliefs and values which inform my understanding of my role in the workplace and to

engage courageously in a dialogue between those aspects of my role which sit well with my personal vision and those which clash; between the parts of my role that I accept and the parts that I reject; between the skills and vulnerabilities of which I am aware and those of which I am blind. With eyes wide open, such reflection invites congruence, balance and harmony between inner and outer worlds.

### **Spacious**

Nothing more dampens courage or blurs sight than filling every nook and cranny of the reflective space with an urgent sense that that the clock is ticking, something (worse still someone) has to be fixed, and a riddle requires resolution. In a beautiful poem, Mark Stobert writes of the spaciousness needed in our chaplaincy work and by extension in our reflecting upon it:

“The slow, slow questions wait  
 In hiding.  
 They wait until they perceive that  
 Once exposed in the open they  
 Won't be dropped or damaged.  
 Even a space (opened) between will suffice  
 Only after delicate testing

Emerging from the shadows  
 The slow, slow questions search for  
 Somewhere to alight.  
 A bird flying to a perch  
 And sing its song.

Does it matter that the song  
 Is not replied to?  
 The slow, slow questions  
 Sing as sing they must.

The reply? Ah! The slow, slow, slower answers  
 Reach and embrace the questions,  
 Not with words  
 Not in song  
 But as dance  
 The dance of love.” *(with permission)*

### **Courageous Reflecting is Redemptive**

In a book on caring for the carers, Jon Conte says that just as ‘oil splatters on the painter’s shirt or dirt gets under the gardener’s nails’ so the work we do leaves its mark upon us and has an impact’. (Jon Conte in van Dernoort Lipsky, L. (2009), *Trauma Stewardship: An everyday guide to caring for self while caring for others*, San Francisco, Berrett-Koehler Publishers p xii)

It goes without saying that our work impacts greatly upon us. Sometimes it brings out the best in us. At other times we fall short of our own or other people’s expectations.

Being able to expose those short falls to the loving and supportive eye of another can go a long way to releasing ourselves from the limitations of being human, dusting ourselves down and getting up to face a new day. But that takes courage and asks us to admit our own neediness. Brian Patten puts it lyrically in his poem *'Throwing the lifebelt'*

And the one throwing the lifebelt

Even he needs help at times;  
Stranded on the beach  
Terrified of the waves.

*Brian Patten*

### **Sabbatical**

Finally the kind of reflective practice I want to see more of has a sabbatical quality in which people find sufficient rest to enable them to return to work renewed, energised and refreshed. Sonja Rose has a beautiful poem entitled 'The Eighth Day'. I invite you to hear it as if she were speaking about space for reflection

*The Eighth Day*

I declare today  
the eighth day of the week,  
freed of oughts and shoulds and even musts;  
a holiday, a holy day,  
a gift without strings,  
a time-space to savour,  
to expand into rooms long neglected  
and linger there,  
patiently,  
watching for unknown buds to flower ---

Welcome them,  
though they may startle  
with dark,  
unexpected blooms.

*Sonja Rose (1930 -*

As an eighth day activity, 'freed of oughts and shoulds and even musts', wide eyed reflection 'expands into rooms long neglected, and lingers there, patiently, watching for unknown buds to flower ... with dark, unexpected blooms.

### **To summarise**

I have been arguing that rather than take a model for reflective practice or supervision off some other groups shelf – whether that be tried and tested models for

nurses or counsellors or business managers – what is needed, if we are to sustain ourselves from the inside, is that we take the very best of what is ‘out there’ and add into the mix, attention to the vocational, contemplative and visionary dimensions of our lives and work in an atmosphere and style that is spacious, redemptive and sabbatical in quality.