
A “SENSE OF REALITY”: HOW AUSTIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY TEACHES LEADERSHIP

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And at the back of this is a just feeling that statecraft - the art of governing and altering societies - is unlike either the erudition of scholars or scientific knowledge; that statesmen of genius, unlike the masters of these disciplines, cannot communicate their knowledge directly, cannot teach a specific set of rules, cannot set forth any propositions they have established in a form in which they can be learned easily by others (so that no one need establish them again), or teach a method which, after them, any competent specialist can practice without needing the genius of the original inventor or discoverer. What is called wisdom in statesmen, political skill, is understanding rather than knowledge - some kind of acquaintance with relevant facts of such a kind that enables those who have it to tell what fits with what: what can be done in given circumstances and what cannot, what means will work in what situations and how far, without necessarily being able to explain how they know this or even what they know.

Isaiah Berlin¹

A “SENSE OF REALITY”

The irony at the heart of the teaching of leadership is that it is infinitely easier to teach *about* leadership than it is to teach people *to lead*. This fact has led some (I believe, erroneously) to conclude that leadership cannot be taught or learned at all, that one is either born a leader or one is not—as though leadership were inscribed in one’s genetic code.

Granted, there are people whose background and familial upbringing, experiences, and capacities may better prepare them for certain aspects of leadership. There also are people who simply do not seem willing or able to learn to lead. However, I also would argue that leadership can be learned, and that it even can be taught, if we construe teaching to include the establishment of environments in which learning

¹ Isaiah Berlin, *The Sense of Reality*, Henry Hardy editor (New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 32.

occurs.² However, if the teaching of leadership is to be effective, it must take into account the wisdom represented in the epigraph above from Sir Isaiah Berlin's essay, "The Sense of Reality." This passage (and the entire essay is worth careful reflection) has guided my teaching of leadership since I first read it in 1997. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the wisdom contained in this passage has also shaped, to a considerable degree, the development of leadership education at Austin Seminary, at least during the past few years.

Berlin's essential insight into leadership, as expressed in "The Sense of Reality," was further articulated in another of his essays, "Political Judgment." Berlin describes political judgment as a semi-intuitive feel for leadership that must be developed in and through the practice of actual leadership in specific situations. He writes:

Obviously what matters is to understand a particular situation in its full uniqueness, the particular men [sic] and events and dangers, the particular hopes and fears which are actively at work in a particular place at a particular time: in Paris in 1791, in Petrograd in 1917, in Budapest in 1956, in Prague in 1968 or in Moscow in 1991. We need not attend systematically to whatever it is that these have in common with other events and other situations, which may resemble them in some respects, but may happen to lack exactly that which makes all the difference at a particular moment, in a particular place. If I am driving a car in desperate haste, and come to a rickety-looking bridge, and must make up my mind whether it will bear my weight, some knowledge of the principles of engineering would no doubt be useful. But even so I can scarcely afford to stop to survey and calculate. To be useful to me in a crisis such knowledge must have given

2 Incidentally, the whole notion of "family background, etc" is considerably problematized when one reflects on the biographies of so many geniuses of leadership, such as, for example, Winston Churchill. If one were going to generalize from his experience what a great leader "needs" in terms of family background one might well assume that leaders need alternating neglect and abuse—rather than positive role modeling and support—from parents, in order to prepare for public leadership.

rise to a semi-instinctive skill - like the ability to read without simultaneous awareness of the rules of the language.³

This “semi-instinctive skill” Berlin says is what we mean when “we speak of some people as possessing antennae.”⁴ Deborah Jinkins and I attempted to describe the same “sense of reality” as “a sense of smell for leadership.” We elaborated on this hard-to-define aspect of leadership, describing it as:

an acquired use of innate senses, like the ability to discern by smell and taste, by sight and feeling on the tongue, a good wine from a poor one.... The sense of smell for leadership assumes an entire community of discernment from which we can learn and in which the discernment of one person is tested against that of another.⁵

As a teacher of leadership, I have been puzzled for years with how we can better stimulate in people the development of this “sense.” And I have come to believe that this is our primary task as leadership educators: to stimulate the development of a “sense of reality,” of political judgment, of discernment, of the deep “semi-instinctive skill” of leadership. Having now returned from full-time teaching to a leadership role in theological education, I am more convinced than ever about a leaders’ need for “sense of smell.” My teaching of leadership must be informed by Berlin’s insight, if it is to contribute to the *actual leading of the church* and not only to the *accumulation of the body of knowledge about leadership in the church* (as worthwhile as this secondary goal may be). Perhaps a bit of history will help to contextualize our current practice of teaching leadership at Austin Seminary.

STRUCTURAL AND CURRICULAR BACKGROUND

When I joined the faculty of Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary, I inherited a couple of courses in leadership that had been taught for years mostly by adjuncts.

³ Berlin, 45.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Michael Jinkins and Deborah Bradshaw Jinkins, *The Character of Leadership: Political Realism and Public Virtue in Nonprofit Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1998), 61, 63.

The task given me by the administration and faculty, in addition to leadership of the school's Supervised Practice of Ministry (SPM) program, was to revise these courses and to propose new ones.

The philosophical foundations underpinning the SPM program were excellent. Indeed, I am convinced that Austin's SPM program at its foundation in the early 1970s was decades ahead of its time. Successive directors of this program have largely built and remodeled on this solid foundation. Not so the foundations of the leadership courses. They were virtually uninformed by important theoretical advances in the discipline of practical theology or by current research in organizational leadership. The courses were largely settings for the re-telling of pastoral war stories and the promulgation of popular myths. It also became clear that whatever *leadership education* had been going on, it was not deeply grounded in theological reflection.

The greatest challenge for me as I began teaching leadership was to gain a deeper theoretical understanding of leadership for myself. This continues to be a challenge for me because, while I served in pastoral leadership for some thirteen years prior to teaching, my formal training was in systematic and historical theology. Quite simply, I think like a theologian. In retrospect, this limitation in my experience and training has not been entirely negative. Yet I am aware that I have had to run to keep up with many of the excellent scholars and teachers in the Academy of Religious Leadership. They bring a much more sophisticated knowledge of leadership, organizational behavior and of the social sciences to our field.

In 1993, the year I arrived at Austin Seminary, the two *leadership* courses in the area we then called "Church Administration" were: CM.303 THEORY AND MODELS OF CHURCH ADMINISTRATION and CM.305 DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN THE PARTICULAR CHURCH. Today, Austin Seminary's offerings in "Leadership and Administration" include the following:

CM. 305 LEADERSHIP: THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE IN
PASTORAL MINISTRY

CM. 337 POWER AND CHANGE IN PASTORAL MINISTRY

CM.335 ENTRY INTO MINISTRY

CM. 339 WORKSHOP IN CHURCH ADMINISTRATION

The last of these courses (WORKSHOPS IN CHURCH ADMINISTRATION) is actually a series of topical seminars with a strong laboratory/ praxis component in the core competencies of church leadership. The course focuses an entire semester on each of the following topics: conflict, stewardship and finance, church management, multi-staff leadership, and church-related law.

All of these courses understand leadership and management in the church as profoundly theological vocations. This is the aspect of our program that probably has benefited to some degree from my background in theology. The dynamics of the courses move between critical theological reflection and the practice of leadership, theoretical analysis, and reflection on current research in a way that resists the bifurcation of *theory* and *practice* all too common.

The theological character of the leadership courses in our curriculum is further underscored by the fact that other courses such as CM.207 THE FUTURE OF THE CHURCH: AN INTRODUCTION TO PRACTICAL ECCLESIOLOGY; CM./TH.279 DIETRICH BONHOEFFER AND THE PUBLIC CHURCH (an offering in both the Church's Ministry Department and in the Theological and Historical Department); CM.209 THE CALL TO MINISTRY: COMMUNITY, VOCATION, AND PRACTICE; and CM.225 THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE PASTOR are listed under the catalogue heading of "Leadership and Administration." The manner in which faculty members share the instruction of these courses also underscores their theological character. While initially I was charged with the responsibility for designing and teaching all of these courses, in recent years (and this is even more the case since I became Academic Dean), other colleagues now share in the teaching of courses in this area. For example: The SPM Director (who also directs our certification program in spirituality) teaches THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE PASTOR.

The holder of Austin Seminary's new chair in pastoral leadership and ministry (the addition of which provides our curriculum with two full-time resident faculty members in church leadership) now teaches all of the workshops in

church administration. David Jensen (my colleague in constructive theology) and I co-teach the course on Bonhoeffer and the public church. I am grateful that Austin Seminary has seen the value of the teaching of leadership in theological education, and that the faculty, administration, and board of trustees have supported the expansion of this area of the curriculum with significant financial and personnel resources. Yet I sense that we might have only scratched the surface.

PEDAGOGY: PRESENT AND FUTURE

For the past several years, I have experienced a growing dissatisfaction with the teaching of leadership. Not only am I convinced that even the best students of leadership, those who graduate knowing a lot *about* leadership, all-too-often *are not good at leading congregations after they graduate*. I am also convinced that most approaches to addressing this problem simply end up drilling people in specific administrative skills without awakening in them that sense or feel or intuition for leading, what Berlin referred to as the deep “semi-instinctive skill” and “political judgment,” that is present in really great leaders. I am also convinced that few of our graduates possess a critical self-understanding regarding the fault-lines that run deep inside of them as persons. They thus often lack knowledge of the self-destructive default reactions for which they tend to opt under stress. These are the sorts of reactions that will almost certainly undercut their leadership, if they remain unexamined. Readers familiar with Ron Heifetz’s recent research and his reflections on leadership pedagogy will recognize these concerns.⁶

While our past teaching of leadership at Austin Seminary was insufficiently theoretical, I am convinced that our present teaching fails to discover ways to place students in educational environments where learning can occur at the deepest personal levels. It is at those levels at which leadership most frequently either succeeds or fails in the long-

⁶ These concerns surface in Heifetz’s and Marty Linsky’s *Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002).

run. This reflection of mine is meant, by the way, as confession and not as an accusation. I think that most students who study leadership with me learn a lot *about* leadership, but I am not convinced *they learn to lead*.

That being said, there is one course I teach in leadership that has shown some promise in getting this whole *thing* right: "POWER AND CHANGE IN PASTORAL MINISTRY." I teach "Power and Change" in an intensive January term, using films and readings and case studies dealing with the civil rights movement of the nineteen fifties and sixties. The course challenges students at a profoundly personal level regarding their own relationship to power and change. The feelings evoked among students in the course inevitably run *very* high.

Students must read a great deal in the theoretical realm. This is absolutely crucial. They read everything from Bertrand de Jouvenel, Michel Foucault, and Hannah Arendt to Bertrand Russell, Dennis Wrong, Rebecca Chopp and John Kenneth Galbraith. They read Cornel West, W. E. Du Bois, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mohandas K. Gandhi. The reading assignments are *huge*. They are difficult. They are time-consuming. They are profoundly challenging. And they are all of these things for two reasons: (1) to provide an adequate network of theoretical understandings to frame our class discussions; and (2) to increase the stress level students feel, so that they will more likely allow their default reactions to show in class. Again, this class occurs in our January mini-semester, an intensive setting during which students ordinarily take only one class. The class is set in three-hour blocks. Students spend a large amount of their time outside of the classroom reading and working on a major case-study. Tension builds steadily as radical new ideas are introduced quickly, with little time to assimilate and digest them. This is all part of the course design.

This course requires that I remain non-anxious, centered in my teaching/learning role, and sensitive almost moment by moment to where the students are located emotionally. It can be exhausting for me and for them. But whenever I teach this course, I see genuine moments of transformation in the attitudes, understandings, and lives of students with reference to power and change. In a sense, they learn power. They learn change. They wrestle with both power and change in

themselves. They do not simply learn *about* these “subjects.” In fact, I should hasten to add, *we all* learn - *we are all* changed - because this courses places us (teacher and students) together in a community of learning. The environment sets up its own pedagogical conditions.

This experience of teaching is leading me to radically re-think other current offerings on leadership. For example, I am now designing a leadership course to help students learn *to lead*, rather than to learn *about* leadership. I hasten to add that this is a new offering and does not replace any of the leadership courses I currently teach (at least not yet!). While I have not completed the task of designing the course, there are two things I know that I will include in the new course.

- * *A strong visual, experiential element:* While I have often used films (and novels) as a supplementary resource in courses before, this course will use films to a degree I have never before attempted. After the first two weeks of theoretical engagement, simply to gain a general knowledge of the analytical frameworks we will use in critical reflection, we will watch a different film every week. Each film will be followed by a focused discussion. We will use films like “Elizabeth,” episodes from “The West Wing” and “Yes, Prime Minister,” “Path to War,” and “Thirteen Days.” Some films will explore what one might call explicit “themes” of leadership, such as the formation of the leader’s character, the “problem” of gender in leadership, the challenge of role integrity, and the inter-relationship of power and authority. Many films will explore situations and character broadly, delving into the very complexity of life itself, since so much we face as leaders cannot be reduced to categories or themes at all. The course will be taught either on weekends or in the evenings, so that we can dedicate a full three-hour block to each class meeting. This setting will also allow the seminary to open this course to the larger community.
- * *Theoretical frameworks for critical reflection:* This course will introduce a set of theoretical frameworks to use each week as we analyze the leadership situations explored in the films. It is at this point and in this way that I will introduce students to the insights of some of the best thinkers in leadership and organizational behavior: Edgar

Schein, for example, and Ron Heifetz, Peter Vaill, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, Jim Collins, Paul Hersey, and many others. These scholars and practitioners of leadership will provide theoretical lenses through which to bring focus to our critical reflections.

My hope is that these theoretical frameworks will provide students with the same sort of tools jazz musicians use. In the mastery of leadership's scales and modes, students can increase in themselves what Berlin described as the "capacity to improvise."⁷

There is another aspect to this new course which I have yet to determine; it is perhaps the most difficult element in the entire mixture -that of improvisation. As a former jazz musician, and as one who currently spends a lot of time improvising as a leader, I am convinced this is the most crucial piece of the whole pedagogical puzzle. One does not practice improvisation as one practices scales. A jazz performer does not master specific responses to musical moments, as though a single response is right for every situation. One prepares oneself as a musician, certainly. One masters the technical aspects of an instrument. One tests and knows the instrument's capabilities and explores the limits of these capabilities. One makes sure of one's own *chops*, and works hard to extend the effectiveness of one's own technical skills. But improvisation is learned by improvising in real jam sessions. These jam sessions are not intended to be rehearsals for a later performance that is a mere repetition of the same music. Every improvisation has its own integrity as a response to all the elements surrounding a musician (indeed, that surround the jazz ensemble) at that particular moment. And that moment will never come again. What we develop as jazz performers is the capacity to sense the music and to respond to the serendipity of unique moments with grace and style.

I think this is something like what Berlin is getting at when he speaks of the "sense of reality" and "political judgment" necessary for great leadership. This is why he says, at the close of the latter essay:

To demand or preach mechanical precision, even in principle, in a field incapable of it is to be blind and to

⁷ Berlin, *Sense of Reality*, 52.

mislead others. Moreover, there is always the part played by pure luck - which, mysteriously enough, men [sic] of good judgment seem to enjoy rather more often than others. This, too, is perhaps worth pondering.⁸

This is, at the least, what I am pondering.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 53