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Perspectives on Leadership: Insights from Aboriginal Elders

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The Creator put our people into the valley of the Nass River and told us that the bowl that was formed from the mountains and valleys, the rivers and glaciers, was ours. It contained all that we needed to live in harmony. It was called the Common Bowl: saytk'ilhl wo'isihl Nisga'a. We have the resources of the land, the rivers and the valley. Everything is to be shared as a Common Bowl with Nisga'a people.¹

Elder Bert MacKay tells this story. For some this is seen as a currently active political story. For some others it is a spiritual story, indicating the foundation of the land as mother of all creation, source of all life. The account can also be seen as a reflection on leadership in a context where elders have passed on stories, traditions, and raised up leaders able to move generation after generation in the ways of their culture. Finally, the story can be a vehicle for theological reflection, in a narrative model or in a praxis model as we consider some theological foundations for leadership.

In 1993 a group of theological field educators from Canadian seminaries were at a meeting discussing ways of reconceptualizing the supervision of ministry students. Essentially the understanding of supervision had come by way of the Management by Objectives business training and had been adapted for theological students. It was time to think again about what we meant by the supervision of these leaders in training. This question coincided with an opportunity for sabbatical research provided for this writer by our seminary. This School of Theology has a Master of Divinity programme by extension in First Nations communities in northern British Columbia, northern Manitoba, South Dakota and Alaska. The hunch was

that listening to the elders and observing their leadership in community would provide us with another understanding of leadership to ponder, since the elders are the ones whose primary responsibilities include identifying, raising up, and training new leaders. How do they do this? Meeting elders in Prince Rupert and New Aiyansh, B.C., Swampy Creek, Manitoba, Rosebud, Martin and Pine Ridge, South Dakota, and Rotarua, Aotearoa/New Zealand raised many questions about leadership in communities and congregations today. While their insights are culturally specific, their leadership ways give certain lenses through which we can examine contemporary congregational leadership.

Since leadership in these aboriginal congregations and communities is learned primarily through the use of story, the first task of this article is to examine how we reflect on stories theologically so that they can lead to action for effective leadership. Narrative theology is "a method of examining religious convictions which focuses on the lived experiences of individuals and communities as expressed in the stories of their lives."²

Traditionally we have done most of our theological inquiry in a rational mode, taking certain principles and truths and examining them historically, systematically, exegetically, and applying them to our life as Christian people in order to provide us with a solid base to stand upon while we wrestle with life in all its great complexities. Narrative theology begins at a different place. This methodology sees the stories of human life, individually and corporately, as the content of faith, and the means by which the faith is communicated. Stories are not *about* life; they are life, and the life of faith is understood in light of a particular story. Narrative theology takes these stories and draws from them formulations and conclusions which lead to action and response, and, of course, more reflection again. A concrete non-story illustrates the point. A wood carver holds a piece of cedar in his hand. He feels it, turns it, and rubs it gently. He looks at it and into it for a long time. He encounters it and allows it to encounter him. Between them a form emerges. It is still a piece of wood, yet it becomes an art form, an expression of truth, a new creation. The madonna or the clenched fist of protest or the soaring eagle was there before the carver picked up the tool. The carver could have said, "This is a piece of wood", and left it at that. But as he entered the wood, he discovered the form and shape and truth.

Similarly we hear a story. We can listen to it and repeat it back as a story. We can feel it and let our feelings and the feelings in the story touch. We can enter the story with the teller and discover the truth and beauty and power of the story. And we will be changed, for we have been on holy (or unholy!) ground. The Haida story of Raven and creation is formative for everyone in the Haida nation. In it Raven plucks out of the clam shell the first people, plays with them, nurtures them by bringing them light, separates them as women and as men, and gives them confidence to live outside the mollusk. This story is the essence of life. It leads to respect for creator and creation. It prompts action against any institution, any person, or any action that threatens the creation.

C. S. Song does the same thing as he considers the theological power of Asian stories. They arise from deep within the culture; they are brought to the surface by leaders, and the implications for daily life and work are discovered within each story. Every story is a story with meaning. The teller and the listeners search for meaning in the story that is told by entering the story again and again until the meaning is clear. Almost all stories, Song says, are stories with deep theological meanings, mostly about salvation and redemption and the realities of life.³ Song believes that everyone is looking for redemption, and thus our individual and collective stories are about redemption. If we think back to the beginning of this article, the Nisga'a story of the Common Bowl is certainly one of redemption even today.

In visiting with elders in aboriginal communities there were many stories of leadership. One man, now a bishop as well as an elder in Lakota culture, told about learning to ride a horse in his youth. When he was the right age his uncle, a wise elder, told him the stories of the horse. By the time these stories had been told, he knew how to saddle up and how to ride before ever touching the horse or the saddle. The stories he had been told had conveyed the truth. The message within each story helped him to move to each level of learning naturally. Leadership in congregations includes story telling, and story listening, but more than that it means that the leader knows when and how to tell the stories in such a way that the people understand and apply the stories as they are needed in the life of the parish.

Congregational leaders in our churches today need to know what the tradition is and what is essential to the life and health

of the congregation. Leaders are people who are tradition bearers, and who take responsibility for both knowing the tradition and passing it on. How do they exercise this aspect of leadership? Another Lakota elder spoke of *tiospaye*, kinship or clanship, a family principle. The elders take responsibility to teach the growing and developing Lakota what is important in their culture. Through this teaching, mostly in story form, they learn the cardinal virtues of the Lakota family: bravery, respect, fortitude and generosity. Every story, every experience, every teaching points ultimately to what is distinctive about kinship in this culture. The leader knows what actions point to these virtues and encourages those preparing for leadership to surround themselves with such truth. What do the traditions of the congregation today say about the essential virtues of that congregation? This would be an excellent leadership exercise with a group of people who are evaluating the life of a congregation and determining a course of action for mission.

Many aboriginal leaders have a natural ability to mediate the normal conflicts of human interaction. They listen well. Listening is the primary method of leading. They listen to discover what is going on. They are not frightened or so impatient that they leap into immediate action when conflict arises. Rather, they listen for a long time, until all has been said, even if that takes days or weeks or months. They may subtly suggest that there are other ways of solving a difficulty, but they are willing to wait in patience until the time is right. We are reminded of such patience in conflict as the various land claims are being negotiated between first nations and governments these days. Waiting over a hundred years is reality for some of them. In congregational life in the present generation, with our desire for instant feedback with immediate data while conflict is fresh in our minds, the time consuming practice of the elder feels somewhat absurd. However, today's leaders might remind themselves of the need to listen patiently until all has been said before beginning conflict resolution.

Leaders are vision keepers. Jesus went into the wilderness as a young man just after his baptism. There he wrestled until his vision for ministry emerged. This is described early in St. Mark's Gospel. Moses also discovered his vision in that dramatic burning bush in the wilderness as he was tending

the sheep. Metaphorically he went into the bush and found the call to lead the people out of bondage and into freedom. Discerning a vision is a spiritual vocation for all people. The Vision Quest is a rite of passage in which the young native man or woman tries out new ways, new skills, new identities, and “pierces the veneers of presumptive professionalism and reflects on the meaning of life in ministry and mission.”⁴ Leaders are sensitive to the moments when people and congregations are ready to move towards a new vision, and accompany them in some way into that vision, without predetermining what the vision is. Hodgson and Kothare point out that the quest for a vision is a communal (congregational?) possibility with strong biblical roots:

For the Hebrews as well as for native peoples the Vision Quest was not the preserve of a select few, nor was it something that happened to people only sporadically. [It] was a spiritual vocation for an entire people, men and women, young and old (Acts 2:17–18, Joel 2:28–29), who were called to pierce the veil of what the Lakota medicine man *Lame Deer* calls the “green frogskin world,” (“the green frog-skin” being *Lame Deer*’s euphemism for the almighty dollar bill).⁵

There is a lot of time in the wilderness to pray, to discern, to struggle and to reflect on the meaning of life. Few of us find that luxury in our short term wildernesses, and in fact, time becomes a problem for many leaders. Over the years as a leader in both congregation and seminary I have been somewhat neurotic about time. Will we start on time, end on time, be faithful about time, accomplish what we wanted to in the time available? Such behaviour often assists a group to move from one point to another, but at what cost? One always must ask how such priorities show respect and honour to persons and their values, rather than impose the leader’s standards on others. In visiting in First Nations’ communities a different dimension of time was discovered. “What time is it?” and “When did it happen?” do not have to be *chronos* questions. Rather they can be about natural rhythms that relate to seasons. We can participate with nature and in rhythm with God’s creation. The Lakota people have a tradition of naming the time as seasons of the moon. It was in the Moon of Red Blooming Lilies that the people gathered to make decisions about a course of action they would take. It was in the Moon when the Deer Paw The Earth that a young man set off for his Vision Quest. It

was in the Moon when the Snow Drifts, or the Moon when the Geese Shed Their Feathers that other significant events took place. History, their story, is remembered as the natural world unfolds.

To assist the congregation to identify the seasons of their life and what affects their natural rhythms would be a gift that a sensitive leader could offer. Such leadership could help others to focus on sabbath times and on the meaning of time. An additional gift might be to ward off workaholic patterns that are so prevalent in ministry and which lead to despair, disillusionment and burnout. If only we were less controlled by our clocks and more in touch with the rhythms that touch us all!

One of the demons that Christian leaders fight these days is the focus on individualism. Whether we are reflecting on the meaning of salvation or the doctrine of the Eucharist there is a strong bias to express this in terms of what this means for me, rather than the meaning for the people of God as a whole. The elders who spoke of their faith and life always set these in the midst of community, and the higher good was that of the Common Bowl or the clan of the *tiospaye*, rather than individual persons. It is not only the stories of First Nations that draw attention to this, but also the stories and the tradition of the whole church which call us back to being the people of God in community. Our traditional stories of Deliverance and Redemption, Baptism and Eucharist, Easter and Pentecost are all set in the midst of the community: the people of God.

A dozen of the Swampy Cree elders of Shoal River, Manitoba were gathered one morning in their parish church. They were asked to tell the visitor about their church and its place in their community. One by one they cried

Our people are afraid.
 We are losing the young people
 to drugs, alcohol, gambling.
 Our way of life is replaced by
 snowmobile and computer.
 The young people will not know
 what we do, how we do it,
 what we believe,
 what we want their children to know.

We are sad, we don't know what to do.

Over and over again the refrain went on. Each one said the same thing in her or his own way. As the writer heard this repeated chant, it was suddenly clear that this group of elders was lamenting the loss of a future and the possible loss of their tradition and culture. A superficial ear might have heard whining or grumbling, but when the chorus became corporate it turned into lament. Leaders in every church need to hear the true laments, sometimes buried below the surface because of being treated as complaint. When the laments are acknowledged and voiced together they can be transcended and the community can be freed to move on as they plan for change. The Psalmist invited his community to join in the lament:

O Lord, God of my salvation
when, at night, I cry out in your presence,
let my prayer come before you;
incline your ear to my cry.
For my soul is full of troubles
and my life draws near to Sheol.
I am counted among those who go down to the Pit;
I am like those who have no help,
like those forsaken among the dead,
like the slain that lie in the grave;
like those whom you remember no more,
for they are cut off from your hand (Psalm 88:1-5).

Lest we become bogged down by lament and conflict let us turn to a more energizing aspect of leadership. Similar in process yet very different in focus is the role of dance. A week of heavy meetings, fraught with anger and anxiety, frustration and disappointment saw the Nisga'a elders weighed down with community responsibility. How would there be a way through the tangle of negotiating with federal and provincial governments, local band councils, tribal council and assembly? Instead of being defeated in the presence of these principalities and powers, they celebrated their life in dance. A long evening of tribal dance brought elders and children, men and women, from every household: killer whales and salmon, ravens and frogs all dancing together to the common beat of the drums. Hour after hour they felt their ancient rhythms and expressed life, reflecting their hope and their tradition at one and the same time.

Parish leaders, especially the more creative ones, can help the people to recall the rhythms of congregational life and celebrate their hope while honouring their tradition. Such experiences need no words, no formal education, no consultants or managers. Our leadership training tends to reinforce academic skills for a western cerebral culture and ignore some ways of integrating the tradition with life-giving rhythm and dance.

Earlier we discussed conflict and our present culture's need for immediate feedback. One of the elders was asked what he would do if a ministry student in his village preached a sermon that was excessively long. He laughed and said, "Well, we would wait for the time to be right. Then we would be gathered at a feast or some other public occasion, and we would, of course, be telling stories. One of the elders would stand up and note the presence of the reverend, and then laughingly would remember the sermon he preached a year or so ago for 45 minutes." There would be no other need for feedback. The preacher would get the point (if he hadn't already) but it would all be set in humour so that he did not have to have a personal encounter and lose face. Every congregational leader must possess a sense of humour in order to appropriate the role of leader. If one cannot stand back and laugh at oneself, one's responsibilities, and one's failures from time to time, there will be little energy left for the times one cannot laugh.

Not all of the above applies to normal congregational leadership at the end of the twentieth century, of course. Certain critiques can be raised, not the least of which is that the culture of most of our churches that are seriously looking at leadership for the next century is very different from the culture of the people of the First Nations today. However, to look at one culture from the perspective of another does give us new eyes with which to view the familiar. In our seminary students learn most about their own denominational distinctives as they observe and discuss with students of other denominations about tradition, history, theology and polity.

The leadership of the elders is, as described, a very reflective process and extremely time consuming. Time is not a commodity that many active leaders have in the church today. One would hope, however, that reflection will continue: theological reflection, reflection on experience and story, reflection

on leadership style and outcomes, reflection on the theology of leadership in the Body of Christ for mission in the world.

The power structure that offers the elder in aboriginal communities as a model for leadership is a very different power structure than that found in many congregations today. It has been one that has placed women in an apparently subservient role, although upon examination often it is the matriarchs who make ultimate decisions and provide some of the hereditary leaders.

It may be difficult for seminary students preparing for lay or ordained leadership in the church to see any value in the leadership patterns of native communities and congregations. The secret lies in listening. The elders have developed the art and the patience required to listen to the stories and the tradition in a way that fosters new leaders. In 1993 Professor Charles Bennison of the Episcopal Divinity School was speaking to a group of clergy and lay leaders in the Diocese of Olympia in Washington State. He shared a story from his own experience of failure in leadership in a congregational setting. He went on to say:

Calvin Coolidge once said, "No one ever *listened* himself out of a job", but listening, parishioners told me, was not my *forte*, and they were right. For all my undergraduate medieval studies somehow I had missed the term *scop* (pronounced 'shop'), used for a bard who goes with the people in their daily lives, listens for their stories, and then in the evening in the mead halls re-tells the great epic story as expressed in terms of their daily stories. A pastor (leader) is, above all, a *scop*. Because it lacked a listener, a *scop*, during my tenure St. Luke's began to lose *shape*—the modern word etymologically derived from *scop*—and until finally, for its own survival's sake, it needed to replace me with a *scop* to keep its shape. How tragic that I was not a *scop*, one capable of listening *for* the story of St. Luke's in the way described by the Southern writer Eudora Welty. She writes: "Long before I wrote stories, I listened *for* stories. Listening *for* them is something more acute than listening to them. I suppose it's an early form of participation in what goes on. Listening children know stories are there. When their elders sit and begin, children are just waiting and hoping for one to come out, like a mouse from its hole."⁶

In many levels of education for leadership there is always a tension between theological reflection and skill development. Listening to the elders has changed this writer to reflect more

deeply on the meaning of story, its power in all its fullness, and the heritage each story brings each time it is told. The intersection of our story with the stories of the tradition and the stories of the Gospel brings us together and pushes us into action for mission in God's body, the world.⁷

Notes

- ¹ Simoogit Axdiiwilluugooda, Elder Bert MacKay of Nisga'a Nation and Chancellor of Vancouver School of Theology, speaking at the 37th Annual Nisga'a Nation Convention, New Aiyansh, 1994.
- ² Kenneth H. Pohly, "A Narrative Model of Theological Reflection for use in Pastoral Supervision." Unpublished article (Chicago, 1986) 6.
- ³ Choan-Seng Song, lecture notes, "The Theological Power of Story" (Berkeley: Pacific School of Religion, fall, 1985).
- ⁴ Janet Hodgson and Jay Kothare, *Vision Quest: Native Spirituality and the Church in Canada* (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1990) 12.
- ⁵ Ibid. 12. Cf. John Fire/Lame Deer and Richard Erdoes, *Lame Deer, Seeker of Visions* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972) chap. 3.
- ⁶ Eudora Welty, "One Writer's Beginnings" in Charles E. Bennison, Jr., *Congregational Studies as Practical Theology*, Lecture 1 in a Series for the Clergy and Lay Professionals (Seattle: Diocese of Olympia, 1993) 14.
- ⁷ Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).