CAN YOU BUILD A BICYCLE WHILE YOU RIDE IT? AN AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHICAL CRITICAL REFLECTION ON LEADERSHIP, VALUES AND DOING DOCTORAL WORK DURING COVID-19

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Think of love as a state of grace not as a means to anything … but an end in itself
—Gabriel Garcia Marquez, *Love in the Time of Cholera*

VALUES, COVID-19, AND DECISION-MAKING

If there was ever a time for values and for justice in leadership, it is now. If there was ever a time for pragmatism and simply doing the best that you can in leadership, it is now. Perhaps these things are always held in tension, but usually this tension is a backdrop, only held up to the light in erudite discussions. Yet when the Covid-19 crisis began, as the leader of a non-profit organisation that provides aged residential care services, I had to find a way to live within this tension. I had to lead through values, even though I was reacting and deciding things so fast there was no time for conscious thought of them.

Someone said to me that leading through Covid-19 lockdown was like building a bicycle while riding it. That is amusingly apt, because so many of the decisions that had to be made were new to all of us. Thinking beyond such bumper-sticker wisdom, however, as we moved from crisis to management, I reflected that if you were not used to values-based decision-making, if you did not have justice, aroha, at the base of who you are as a leader and who your organisation is, then this would not have been the time you could learn them. This was a time for reflex, rather than reflection. What drives me as a leader and what drives my organisation came out, and will come out, in a myriad of big and small decisions. I cannot fake who I am as a leader in this circumstance. Covid-19 strips all things bare, to the base. I am revealed for who I am and what I focus on.

"Begin with a question – what stands at the centre of the work of a particular organisation?" (Jeavons 1992, p. 406). When the Covid-19 crisis first started to appear, and to impact on me, my team, my leadership, our services, I instinctively reflected on the values that stand behind how we would respond. I told the team that these were our priorities, and in this order:

1. Be good 'corporate citizens' and protect public health

2. Continue to care for our residents/clients and protect them and staff

3. If we could *not* go broke in the process of doing 1 and 2, that would be great.

These priorities did not really have to be thought about or debated. It was an 'of course' moment. Of course, also easy for me to do this because as an essential service I knew my organisation was not likely to go broke. We would

take a dent, for sure, but we all had jobs during lockdown and knew we would have them afterwards. As the crisis unfolded, and decisions had to be made, I knew I was not going to have to lay off staff or reduce wages. Compared to many organisations, I was in an emotionally less complex place where the values were perhaps easier to hold.

Yet despite our privileged essential service status, there were many difficult and emotional decisions. People were afraid. They wanted to protect themselves and their families from Covid-19, but I needed staff to continue to work and to care for our very vulnerable clients. Some staff were vulnerable themselves and, for most, their work could not be done from home. Our work is where our clients are. In the beginning there was no financial support for self-isolating essential workers, so I had to decide who to support financially and by how much. You also cannot run a large organisation entirely on exceptions, especially in a crisis. There must be policies, and inevitably there are people who do not fit them. Balancing the needs of clients and staff, and the needs of the one and the many, became a daily leadership task, which was helped, but not resolved, by our simple decision-making values framework (above). It did not make for perfectly consistent decisions, but at the very least the framework meant that we knew why we had reacted as we did to a given question or issue.

To give myself some credit, however – the way I have tried over a lengthy career in social services to be a values-based leader, with a long-held understanding of social justice, of the common good, gave me solid ground to stand on as I led through this time. Although my leadership decisions were incredibly pragmatically based, made quickly (yes/no), behind them was a sense of who I wanted to be, how I want to be viewed and the organisation judged, during and after the crisis. This was no easy matter, and my decisions were not automatic just because I work for a non-profit.

All organisations have a tendency to institutionalisation, and institutions often choose survival over mission (Jeavons, 1992). In a crisis this is especially so. To hold to values, personal and organisational, that go beyond marketing, but are about morality, ethics, justice, humanity, love, is never simple. To lead with such values and to make them real, in both the organisation's goals and the processes we use to achieve these goals, is complex and replete with contradictions (Berkovich, 2014). In normal times, let alone a crisis, I know the temptation to walk away from this complexity and go with what works.

During the lockdown crisis, I was thinking and reacting both as a leader of an organisation and as student researcher working on a Doctor of Professional Practice (DProfPrac). My DProfPrac focus is frameworks for social justice decision-making, and as part of my research I am interviewing leaders of non-profit/social change organisations. Lockdown rather interrupted this, but the two interviews with leaders that I managed to undertake before Covid-19 discussed a decision circle from values to pragmatism and back again, and how any framework or system of decision-making needs to support this.

Wearing both my student researcher and my leader hats during lockdown, I wondered if there is also a step that might be called 'preparation.' You need to prepare yourself as a leader, by critical consciousness and reflective practice, for the pragmatic moments, for the times when you need a social justice reflex and do not have time for reflection. Learning in anticipation. Perhaps this practice results in the ability to create a reflective framework that works in that moment – such as the one I created with my team for this crisis. Building a values-based bicycle in motion is easier if you've practiced the core skills of values reflection.

This preparation might also allow for redundancy. Redundancy is used in this context in the positive sense, to mean a store of values, ethics and humanity for my own leadership and for my organisation. We are comfortable with the concept of positive redundancy when we plan temporal things – plant, stock, systems. Panic buying aside, Covid-19 has probably taught us that a store of essentials is useful. Perhaps more than these temporal backups, as a leader I need moral redundancy. I need to have an internal store cupboard of values, discussed, reflected on, tested and refined operationally in my leadership practice. To have this moral or values redundancy requires continual attention to this sphere of leadership, so that it can be drawn on when a one in one-hundred year crisis hits, when personal or organisational mission drift threatens, or when I am tempted to walk on by from the complex and contradictory.

Arguably, our prime minister has demonstrated during Covid-19 that it is possible to operationalise a value: kindness. The question is whether she could have done this without kindness being inherent to her, and possibly to the majority of New Zealanders? A redundancy of kindness means having enough to have extra when more is needed.

JUSTICE IN A CRISIS

Since Covid-19 hit, as both a leader and a student, I have also been reflecting on the place of social justice in a time of crisis. Does social justice matter or is it only a 'peace-time' thing? To say that it must be put on hold would suggest that it is not a fundamental part of society, or an organisation, but something optional. But does it look different in a time of crisis? As a leader of services for older people, I was horrified by some of the discussion that hinted that maybe we could have sacrificed a few more lives for slightly less economic pain. They would have inevitably been older people's lives, and therefore, the unspoken argument went, not that important.

It was good to hear the prime minister and other commentators say that this was a false dichotomy – between the economy and people's lives. For leaders to name and speak to justice issues is, in my experience of leading and being led, not a given. The field of management, which is the pathway by which I and many others emerge into leadership, tends to promote a kind of "moral muteness" (Bird & Waters, 1989), a reluctance to discuss concepts which might reveal who we are, or challenge our inherent epistemology and spirituality (Fry & Slocum Jr, 2008). Much easier, and usually more rewarded, are discussions of pragmatism and achievement. Especially in a crisis. How easy it would have been during lockdown to pretend that there were no moral or justice decisions, only practical ones. Yet I know that, even amidst the Level 4 seriousness and urgency, there were always moral choices in my leadership. Choices for or against justice.

Perhaps the outing of dialogue that promotes false dichotomies in decision-making, and the need to overcome moral muteness, will be part of my framework to support leaders in social justice-based decision-making. As a leader and student, I need to confront my zero game assumptions and prejudices, dream new possibilities (Bochner, 2000), and enable or encourage other leaders to do the same.

METHODOLOGY AND COVID-19

An interesting reflection as a student–researcher using auto-ethnography as my primary methodology has been how the whole response to Covid-19 is relying on scientific positivist methods. The cure, when it comes, or a vaccine, will need to pass the randomised trial 'gold standard,' albeit probably a shortened form of this. As a practitioner–researcher of many years, trying to find ways to capture, and have taken seriously, community-based stories, I have long railed against the traditional canonical understanding of research. Therefore, I am slightly amazed at how much in this context I want this scientific method to be the truth, and have quickly come down hard on information that comes from any other source.

Perhaps my reaction to Covid-19 is reasonable and not a denial of the validity of and need for other methods and methodologies, but an affirmation that it is important to use the right methodology for the right purpose. A virus, and epidemiology, are problems/disciplines that come with some specific methodologies. This is not to say we cannot use a mix of methodologies, but it is important that we use the ones that take the problem or question we are examining forward. It will be interesting to see whether Covid-19 starts to re-emphasise in people's minds the overarching dominance of the positivistic scientific method. Will other methods survive the crisis? Will my research topic survive the crisis, or will it, like everything else around us, never quite be the same?

WHAT WILL KEEP ME FROM FALLING OFF THE BICYCLE?

So back to the bicycle, speeding downhill, not quite built yet. Like everyone, I guess I have been hanging on for dear life, learning skills I never thought I would need, adapting as I go. On reflection, it helps that I have built a few leadership bicycles before, although never under this pressure. But perhaps the most important thing at this time

is letting go of being certain about the end point of this leadership journey, and having faith in my ability to stay on course, strengthened by the values that have sustained me and others. Some things endure. Aroha, justice. There are signs this is so. Maybe my leadership reflection and my DProfPrac research can in some small way capture what is good out of Covid-19. I hope so.

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