

A Radical Heart

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Many of our leadership and organisation development models and approaches today are derived from Western thought and practice, often emphasising goal achievement, competitive advantage and efficient-effectiveness as paramount.

In the Philippines, one ordinary-extraordinary woman, Jasmin, speaks with a radically different voice, challenging our assumptions by her actions and offering a vision of leadership in a more transformational, holistic light.

This article provides a glimpse into her life, work and leadership. It may transform us too.

Keywords

Leadership, love, belief, values, authenticity, servant, transformation.

Introduction

It was a cold winter's night in 2016 when I glanced at my Twitter profile and noticed a new message flash up on the screen. Little did I realise the profound impact that this person who sent it, this experience, would have on my life, my leadership and my OD outlook and approach. I had spent the previous 25+ years working as a leadership coach and OD consultant with international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and similar organisations, trying to make a positive difference in the lives of the poor and most vulnerable people in the world. I didn't know or expect that this most personal encounter with the poor would have such a powerful reciprocal effect on me. I will share some observations, experiences and reflections here.

Jasmin

Jasmin is an ordinary, extraordinary woman in the Philippines. Having grown up desperately poor in a small wooden hut on a jungle-covered mountain in East Philippines, she is now both a student teacher and the Student President at a 'university for the poor' in West

Philippines. Her life story could be made into a book, a film – although I doubt either could capture the colourful vibrancy of Jasmin’s life and its effects on the lives of people and organisations around her. Standing at only 5’ tall, her presence and impact are like those of a giant. I half-jokingly call her a cross between Mother Theresa and Che Guevara. She possesses a rare and radical combination of compassion, conviction and courage.

She astonishes me. That first message asked if I would be willing to offer her coaching support. I had worked for brief periods in other countries in South East Asia and I had loved it there. I had also coached people from various South East Asian countries and found the cross-cultural dynamics stimulating and fascinating. I quickly replied, therefore, saying that I was happy to offer whatever help she would find useful. It turns out that it was I who needed the help, although I wasn’t aware of it at the time. Then, I was wearing my professional coaching and OD hats, self-confident in my studies, experiences, insights and abilities and totally unprepared for how quickly that would all unravel.

I am them

“Would you like to visit us here in the Philippines, to see how we live?” I jumped at the chance, booking the flights immediately without pausing to check first exactly where the Philippines is on the map. My agenda was simple: to meet this intriguing person, to visit poor communities and to offer my expertise. I carried no other preconditions. I simply wanted to be open-minded and open-handed. I was, therefore, mortified to discover that Jasmin was planning to take unpaid leave to accompany me. This woman, who lives in what we would disparagingly call a ‘slum’, was working 18 hours a day simply to earn enough to provide subsistence for her family. Yet she kept that quiet.

I thanked her and asked what would make this visit a great experience for her, not just for me. She responded, “Whatever would make it a great experience for you.” I thought perhaps she was being polite, so tried again and got the same answer. I tried rephrasing the question and still got the same answer. After the fifth attempt, I began to realise that she was responding entirely authentically from within her own personal and cultural construct. I was thinking as an individual, about us as individuals, - as ‘consumers’. She was thinking as community, as shared experience, as contributor. I was thinking, “What do you want?” She was thinking, “What can I give?” It was the first of many cross-cultural confusions, then revelations, that I was about to encounter.

We met at the airport and, after a brief rest, we set off on motorbikes and boats across and between islands to visit remote jungle communities. As we entered one village, first children, then others, surrounded and followed us with a mixture of bemusement and excitement. We came to a wooden hut that served as the village shop. I paused and asked Jasmin: “It has been a long journey in the heat. Would you like something to eat or drink? It’s OK, I have money.” She smiled and said, “OK” then, to my surprise, bought all the snacks she could afford with the money I had just given to her. She immediately began to distribute them to the children around us. She kept nothing for herself.

It became like watching a spontaneous party erupt in the street. It felt like witnessing a miracle. The children laughed loudly and jumped up and down as Jasmin played with them

and chatted joyfully with their parents. Here was this total stranger, standing among a community of people dressed in rags and with bare feet, and yet happiness filled the air like I've never seen before. I felt amazed – and challenged. This wasn't about long-term sustainable development. This was about living, being alive, in the here-and-now. As we left the village, I blurted out, "I couldn't believe how amazing you were with them." Jasmin looked at me with genuine bemusement in her eyes. "Nick – I am them."

Just do it

It was another occasion. We sat at the roadside. The sun was setting and we were waiting for a boat to take us to an opposite island. A small step-through motorbike approached us slowly, balancing three metre-long steel rods precariously that stretched out in front of and behind the bike. As a lifelong motorcyclist, I was fascinated to see this spectacle. Just as it reached us, however, the steel rods slid backwards and fell onto the road. He stopped. His passenger, presumably his wife, jumped off and started lifting the rods back onto the bike. I turned to say something to Jasmin in amusement about what people in the Philippines manage to carry on bikes and, to my surprise, she had disappeared.

As I looked around momentarily, I gradually became aware of a second figure in silhouette helping the first woman to lift the rods. It was Jasmin. While I was still thinking about it, she was already doing it. We finally took a boat, owned by a local fisherman and, as we travelled across the open sea, the boat unexpectedly hit a sandbank. The boat ground to a halt and the fisherman climbed over the side to release the propeller that was, by now, stuck deep in the sand. I remember thinking, "It's OK, he knows what he is doing. We'll be fine." At that, apparently without thinking, Jasmin leapt over the side of the boat and disappeared under the water and the boat to help. She can't swim.

Later that week we walked into a town for a rest day. It was scorching hot in the sunshine and I asked if we could sit on the kerbside to watch and listen to a music band that was standing there, rehearsing. I found the rhythm of the drums and skilful dance routines mesmerising. It created a happy, summer holiday feeling and I took some video footage on my phone to show friends back in the UK. I turned to Jasmin who had been sitting beside me to show her the video. Again, she had disappeared. I looked around, confused, then saw her kneeling humbly and compassionately in front of an elderly, poor street vendor, giving her the very water and food we had brought for ourselves that day. I was stunned.

Some time later, I mentioned these incidents to her. I had noticed a pattern in her immediate responsiveness to people in need and, as a psychological coach, I was curious. I asked, "When the steel rods fell off the bike and you jumped up to help, what were you thinking at the time?" She looked at me and with that same bemused look as before and said, "I wasn't thinking. They needed help – so I helped them." "And the incident on the boat – when you leaped into the water and under the boat, even though you can't swim. What were you thinking then?" Same look, same reply. "And the elderly street vendor too?" "Nick – I know how it is to be poor." I fell silent.

Me first

At that time, Jasmin would wake up at 2am every morning, go to the local market to buy food, bring it back to her boarding house, cook the food, take it back onto the streets and sell it to people on their way to work. She would distribute whatever food was left unsold to poor children on the street, take the utensils home to wash...then start work at 7am for a construction company that built schools in poor areas. She would often get home again at 7pm – then go to a local primary school, where she was Chair of the Board, to support children who were too poor to receive a formal education. This work would earn just enough for her (a single parent), her three children and her parents to survive. Literally.

Her boss came to her in tears one day because the company was experiencing serious cash flow problems outside of its control. She explained that, reluctantly, she would need to lay off some of the construction workers. Jasmin was horrified. She responded immediately: “If you need to make someone redundant, let it be me.” The boss, now equally horrified, said, “No way. You are my best friend and I need you.” Jasmin responded: “These workers depend on this work for everything. If they lose their jobs, it is disaster for their families. Therefore, I will make this easier for you. I resign.” She told me later that evening. Now I too was horrified. How on earth was she going to survive?

Jasmin looked at me earnestly through the Skype screen. “It’s what Jesus would do. What else could I do?” She was absolutely emphatic that this was the right decision. “God has never let me down and I trust he won’t let me down this time too.” Now, as a follower of Jesus it’s easy for me to talk about God and faith from the comfort of my armchair – but this was something entirely different. I felt a deep mixture of fear and despair for her. Yet, three weeks later, by a series of truly miraculous events, she started at a university for the poor as a mature student teacher. The enrolling professor commented afterwards: “In my 20 years of teaching, I have never met anyone like this woman.”

We, not me

The university had imagined they would provide Jasmin with an education. Soon they, like me, would realise that the reverse was also the case. Jasmin immediately stood out as a leader, challenging her fellow students to take their studies seriously: “You are the hope of the nation!” She challenged the university’s focus on individual effort and inspired students to work together for the collective good, reaching out to support competitors in team activities to achieve an even greater result. Now her tutors were bemused too. What to do with this subversive-yet-inspiring revolutionary who was transforming everyone and everything in her path? Some felt threatened, others felt excited.

A crunch point came in a team-based competition where one of the groups excluded a young woman student because of her disability. They believed she would let their side down. Jasmin was openly furious, challenging the team vigorously on its values and behaviour and immediately taking the tearful girl in her arms, embracing her in her own team. This fiery leader was willing to challenge injustice wherever she found it. It would be a mistake to confuse her compassion and inclusivity for a lack of courage or moral weakness. The year progressed and, at the start of the following year, Jasmin was nominated for Student President. This would place her on the Board of the university.

She prayed about it and, after some deep thought, agreed to stand. She pulled together a student team around her and they created a campaign platform based on servanthood, integrity and action. Integrity meant radical transparency and her overt anti-corruption stance drew attention from some corrupt local officials. They threatened her and her family with physical violence, attempting to force her to stand down for fear of their corrupt activities being exposed. I was very afraid for her and I begged her to think very carefully before proceeding. She resolutely refused to back down. I asked her, "Aren't you afraid too?" She answered, "Of course I am, but this is about us, not just about me."

Role model

One month later, she was elected by overwhelming majority as Student President. In the Philippines, this would normally mean a privileged status. Instead, Jasmin decided that her first act as President would be to clean the stench-filled university toilets. With no running water, this was a job that no-one would relish and everyone would avoid. She has done it every week since, on her hands and knees without asking anything or saying anything. Over time, other students have joined in, taking turns on different days to keep the toilets clean. I ask her if it's not time to delegate, to allow her to focus on more important things. I get that bemused look again. "Nick – it's what Jesus would do."

I returned to the Philippines, this time to help her renovate the run-down and earthquake-damaged classrooms. Inspired by Jasmin's example, a Christian biker group in the UK that I belong to sold their motorbike spares to raise money to buy ceiling fans for the unbearably hot and humid rooms. I followed her around as she shared her ideas. "It's not just about improving the classroom conditions. It's about ensuring the poor feel valued." Her vision is stretching, reaching so high that it makes me feel dizzy, but she isn't willing to compromise. I smile as she challenges one of the senior managers to tidy labels on his filing cabinet and remove residual Sellotape from his windows. She demands excellence.

As the work starts, she is the first to pick up a mop and to start to clean the walls. I ask why she hasn't allocated teams to do this. She replies, "I have, and they will start this week, but I am not willing to ask them to do anything that I haven't done first." She is absolutely determined on this point. She leads by example and inspires others to follow. I feel nervous inside and worry that the effort needs to be more organised to achieve her goals. Nevertheless, students appear – a trickle at first – until some 20 volunteers have turned up and they work hard on the rooms together. I feel humbled and amazed by this woman's mysterious ability to achieve the seemingly impossible.

Leaving

I'm keen to learn from her. Everything about her life and leadership challenges and inspires me. She scares and confuses me. She regards herself as nothing and attributes everything to God. I try to glean a manifesto from her, her guiding principles if you like. She responds simply – and yet with deadly seriousness and heartfelt conviction: "Whatever status or power you have, use it for those who are vulnerable; whatever money you have, use it for the poor; whatever strength you have, use it for the weak; whatever hope you have, use to

bring hope to those who live without hope. Speak up for justice and truth – whatever the cost. Pray.” She walks the talk. I feel humbled by comparison.

I fly back to the UK, my head and heart still reeling from these encounters, words and experiences. Days later, before I’ve had chance to process it all, a powerful typhoon strikes East Philippines where Jasmin’s parents live. Their home is destroyed under a mountain mudslide and Jasmin is out there again, in the jungle, crossing raging rivers of mud and trudging through sodden rice fields in the torrential rain to deliver emergency aid, love and hope to the poor who have lost everything. I whisper a silent prayer: “God – help me be more like her.” And I shiver at the thought of what that could demand from me.

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