

PART 2: GETTING STARTED AND DETERMINING THE NATURE AND STRUCTURE OF THE REFLECTIVE EXERCISE¹

GETTING STARTED, internalising the purpose and determining the scope of the notes were surprisingly difficult things to do. For over a month I revisited and revised various aspects and struggled to get an overall structure to which I could write the notes that did not suggest or imply that I was writing a book. Yesterday, I reviewed the notes I had written for this section. Some of them were more like journal jottings than notes and, after sharpening up the main point below, I have put them in my journalling section. Retained in this section are notes on the nature of the reflective exercise, my writing style and the later notes on the publishing issue.

PURPOSES

Basically I now see that my purposes are:

- to know and understand in greater depth myself, my vocational formative life and my relationship with God through Jesus Christ and particularly his vocational dealings with me and mine with him²;
- hopefully, to come to terms with unresolved issues and questions and to find deeper satisfaction, contentment and peace.

METHOD

The way in which I plan to work at these purposes is through a private and personal enterprise, which involves:

1 16.7.12

2 After writing this point the following prayer was in the 8.00am communion service on 1st March 2009:

Jesus said: Take up your cross
 We will follow you, O Christ,
 into the needs of the world;
into the truth of our lives;
 into the pain of our heart;
 into the presence of God.
 Amen

I have put the line that struck me in italics.

- sorting, pruning and organizing relevant papers related to various aspects of my family life, my career as an engineer and my ministerial vocational life and soul friendships;
- making notes on these phases through engaging in “reflective writing” (in contradistinction to descriptive writing or recording or reporting events);
- focussing on the vocational axis of my life and thus on vocational autobiographical rather than biographical notes;
- using a personal or “sermon” rather than an academic style of writing.

INTENTION

My intention is:

- to be as open and honest as possible in writing the notes;
- to write private and personal notes and not to drift into drafting a book;
- to remain openly uncommitted to any use to which the notes may be put in addition to achieving the purposes stated here.

SCOPE AND THEMES

Initially I had thought in terms of a single central theme, my ministerial vocation. Gradually, as I worked at a way of organizing and structuring the notes after I had written in a free flowing way much of what has become Section 4, I became confused about whether I was in actual fact writing a vocational autobiography (my avowed intention) or an autobiography (what I seemed to be drifting into). I worked through my confusion to see that to achieve my purposes there were three interrelated intertwined themes on which I need to write:

- education and my vocational life;
- my career as an engineer;
- my ministerial vocational life.

And I realized that the concept of “journeying” runs through the Notes.³

AFFECTIVITY

In September 2010 I came across the sentences from Richard Hoggart (*An Imagined Life (Life And Times, Volume 3:1959 – 91)*) which is influencing my approach to these notes. More and more I am seeing them as Personal Notes From Retirement.

I have called this sequence A Life and Times so as to avoid the catch-all inaccurate title 'Autobiography'. I thought of calling it 'Cultural Autobiography' but that seemed pompous. It has been about a life lived, after 1957, to some extent in the public eye, in one of the public's eyes; but to describe that is not my main object. It has also been a life of sustained ordinariness, day by day, and that characteristic has been more important than the public.

An immediate response Brian Frost made when I told him in a free flowing conversation on 26th June 2012 about my work on these Notes was to the effect that he could see that doing them could be of much personal value through critically reflecting on my vocational life and putting my papers in order in a parallel way to what Catherine and I have done in relation to our professional vocational lives in the Avec Archives, and the Notes could be of interest and of use to researchers and biographers, the potential of them and all the work involved would be justified by drawing out from them the implications of what I have discerned for extended or extensive processes of critical reflective research into my vocational experience for contemporary or future ministry and the ongoing life of the church. Even though this exchange took only a few minutes, it struck me as being a very important point. It would round off the work, give it wider and future orientated (rather than past oriented) potential significance. It adds another overarching objective to the venture:

To articulate and possibly disseminate the implications of my experience for contemporary and future Christian church and community development ministry and the ongoing life of the Church as revealed by my extensive critical reflection and research into my own vocational experience over a period of seven to ten years.

This aim does not invalidate nor eclipse the original purposes as stated above, which could be described as personally introvert purpose. But it sets the enterprise/project in a wider outward and forward looking context and is entirely consistent with the way in which it has developed in about 3½ years since I wrote those purposes. What is emerging does make this wider purpose eminently feasible and possible. Moreover, I think with a brief introduction/summary of the vocational history and the reflective material for which the implications had been called/derived their status, I think it would be feasible to communicate them through an article or articles.

Put crudely, this objective/purpose raises the game of the Notes and points to the work done serving future ministries and the ongoing work and life of the Church.

AFFECTIVITY: SUBJECTIVITY AND OBJECTIVITY

⁴As I return to these notes in September 2010, I realise there needs to be another section to this Section 2 which I am entitling ‘Affectivity’ for want of a better word. It is about how I feel and recount my thoughts, convictions and experience. Using the work of James Reason, I wrote about this in my PhD thesis to help me and my readers to make allowances or to take into account in evaluating my observations the way in which I feel and record my sensory experiences. (See extract from my thesis which follows or the article by W. Garfield Lickes which so impressed me some twelve years before I read Reason’s article that I kept it). I have no reason (sorry to pun) to think that I am any different in my affectivity than I was in the early 1970’s. As described on p69, I am a “moderate augementer” using Reason’s classifications. I feel things intensively and deeply and I am inclined to express my responses, emotional and intellectual and moral, in the same way with passion. I search for words to do so, especially immediately after such experiences. Then I try to moderate my inner and outer outbursts to make more emotionally and intellectually balanced, accurate and responsible statements. Both kinds of affective descriptions are to be found in these notes! They are subjective and objective.

See also Sebastian Barry on ‘Veracity of autobiographical notes’, extract from *The Secret Scriptures* attached.⁵

REFLECTIVE EXPERIMENTAL LEARNING FROM AND ABOUT ONE’S OWN EXPERIENCE⁶

When I returned to these notes I decided that at appropriate junctures I should attempt a piece on “what I had learnt” – very much in the way in which Ernest E. Neal did in *Hope for the Wretched* (1972) and a method integral to my praxis in church and charity work since the late 1960s. Unexpectedly, however, I found myself in thinking what is or can be involved in learning from experience—in fact what I could learn from a lifetime of casual and serious attempts to learn from experience. Clarifying some of this necessary was before I turn to do the learning pieces and should help keep me to do that task better.

First, experience of all kinds has enormous reasoning potential. Some of this is immediate and unavoidable—

4 15.9.2010

5 15.9.10

6 23.9.10

“That does not work”.

“The penalty and/or consequence of doing that is unacceptable”.

“That does not pay”.

But, learning why it does not work or why the consequences are considered too high and whether they should be, can prove to be a much more difficult and painful learning exercise. Often, the potential is realized only over time, in some cases over a lifetime. Sometimes it is never realized. Realising it is not simply a function of time, it is dependent upon several factors: the personal capacity of people to learn from experiences and the desire, determination and will to do so; the belief that the effort or pain will pay good dividends; the availability of interpersonal encouragement, facilitation and support; the context and leisure to engage in the analytical and reflective processes creatively; the desire to grow, mature and to become a more effective human being and vocational practitioner.⁷

Consequently, reflective experimental reasoning from and about one's own experience is a layered activity over time. So in this particular exercise I need to differentiate between:

1. what I learnt from particular events or experiences at around the time that they occurred (I will refer to this as ‘initial learning’);
2. what I have subsequently learnt from those events or experiences, the circumstances in which I learnt it and whether that reasoning confirmed, extended, revised or negated the original reasoning i.e. at point 1 (I will refer to this as ‘subsequent learning’!);
3. what I am now learning through writing these reflective notes (I will refer to this as ‘present learning’).

Similarities or differences between 1 and 2, 2 and 3 and 1 and 3 can be indications of: learning curves or patterns; growth or lack of it—intellectual, moral or spiritual—and in my praxis, which is a core feature of these Notes; stimulants, triggers and mechanisms of learning and re-learning processes. So, the learning pieces may well include assessments about my growth and development – or lack of it – and how long it took!

Revisited learning questions that occur to me are:

7 It struck me that there is much in common between learning from experience and handling feedback creatively. (See SPP pp60-66 et al]. Some reasoning, for instance, occurs very much like ‘direct personal feedback’.

Thought of spermaticos nature of parables.

4. What were significant features of my learning processes?
What prompted the learning?
How did I learn?
What was the affective and cerebral and spiritual nature of the experience?
Did I encounter/identify any learning inhibitions?
5. What am I learning about my experimental learning process?
6. What are the implications?

It will be interesting to see how all or any of this is reflected / featured in my writing of the learning pieces!

Various things which facilitate learning from experience:

- Seek to understand what happened, how it happened and why. Blaming others, or ourselves, simplistically and holistically, deflects, inhibits and prevents us from doing so. It is an avoidance mechanism, in which I am guilty of indulging. Blaming others makes one feel exonerated and better; blaming myself makes me feel variously good and bad. Both can adversely affect my relationships with myself and others and prevent getting at causes, accepting or apportioning responsibility responsibly and sorting things out with myself and with others. Avoid getting trapped in blame cultures and syndromes: they inhibit learning about experiences and redeeming them.
- Use appropriate means and modes of reflecting, analysing and thinking things through. (cf SPP pp66-70; CMM pp86-91).
- Use interpersonal support. (See SPP, Chapter 9).
- Reflect on what you are learning where possible in relation to what others are learning .
- Know yourself and the tricks of self-preservation and deception.
- Remain open to all forms of new self-learning and prepared to suffer any necessary pain to achieve it and then to rejoice in it and enjoy it!
- Form yourself for reflective experiential learning.
- What we need is time.

God help me to practise this – or at least some of it – in these Notes.

SOME ASPECTS OF THE NATURE OF REFLEXIVE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

It is not an easy option. Nor is it a substitute for other forms of learning through readings, study, direct teaching, instruction, tutoring, observing others, coaching, practice, experiment etc.. It is a rigorous exercise involving heart, mind and soul. But it is not infallible: we can come to the wrong conclusions and live with and by them for years. It can make us more self-sufficient but it can also cut us off from others.

It is a way of experiencing experience more deeply and creatively: it is an experience of experience. It is a process from experience, through experience to experience. (See Hubery's work on experiential education.) It is a means of sharing more creatively other experiences, past, present and future.⁸ Therefore it gives a purposeful thought and dynamic to one's life, ministry and work. To ask the question of any activity, "What are we learning?", invariably changes the mood and produces unusual material.

It can be undertaken by individuals, partnerships and groups.

Experience is, as noted, an inexhaustible source of learning.

Reflective experiential learning is akin to action research.

⁹A further distinction I owe to Richard Hoggart, these notes do not constitute an "intellectual autobiography" or, in less grandiose language, an autobiography of the ideas, insights, beliefs etc. which have inspired and motivated me and informed and shaped my action, behaviour and work. It is about these things, unavoidably so, but it is not about these things per se; it is about them in relation to my vocation.

Hoggart says in the "Introduction – Origins" of his book *Promises to Keep: Thoughts in Old Age* (Continuum, 2005):

It would be excessive even to call this an 'intellectual autobiography'. 'A look back over main concerns within the perspective offered by great age and the sense of nearness of death', is wordy, but would be more??

8 I owe this in part to a note I have about a quote from Brian Wren in *What Language Shall I Borrow?* "The apparatus to experiential experience to reflect on experiences and to shape other experiences. " But I can't locate it to check it!

X3.2-7 (a)
9 15.11.08

¹⁰THE NATURE OF THE REFLECTIVE EXERCISE

Section I, “My rationale for attempting a reflective vocational autobiography” indicates how I see the nature of this exercise during its conception and the early stages of clarifying it. A primary aspect of the exercise is that it is a vocational autobiography, i.e. it is a personal account of my vocations. An autobiography would be a personal account of my life. My vocation is the axis around which the autobiographical notes and observations rotate and which determines their selection, content and structure. Admittedly the vocational autobiography because from early 1950s onwards pursuing my vocation took up most of my creative energy and my time: my life was my vocation and my vocation was my life; it took my life and gave me life. Another aspect of this exercise is that it involves me in reflective writing processes, that is, modes of reflecting and writing which enable me to variably explore, re-examine, reassess experiences and events and my previous and present understanding and interpretation of them. Even though this can be painful, it is at best creative and redemptive. New insights emerge. Attitudes and perceptions are changed and corrected. Past events take on new meanings and added significance. All this changes me, hopefully for the better, and my relationship to my past. Our history is, of course, immutable; our past lives cannot be reordered and reorganized. But our personal life script can be re-written, even radically re-written, because our perspectives are potentially and perpetually mutable.

¹¹Whether or not they do mutate or we amend them depends upon a complex of factors one of which is the state of mind in which we find ourselves and the state of our psychological and spiritual well-being and health. In the light of this last point, what I am about to write could appear somewhat arrogant and self-satisfied, but it is not so. I feel some changes in the way in which I view myself are beginning to occur through what I have done so far. I have just completed Section 4. It is with some humility and much gratitude that I note this. It is one of the things I hoped would happen. Of itself and what it promises, it justifies the enterprise.

STYLE AND PUBLICATION QUESTION AGAIN

Other aspects of the nature of the exercise relate to the style of writing and the question of publication. At an early stage I discussed this project with Charles New and David Copley in co-consultancy sessions. They urged me to write in a “sermon writing style” rather than in the academic style of my publications. I took this to mean writing in a personal and doctrinal mode as

¹⁰ 13.11.08

¹¹ 14.11.08

much for the heart as from the mind, focusing on issues of importance without necessarily trying to set them in an overall theoretical or theological framework. To write, that is, episodically rather than systematically. When Charles New and Ian Johnson read the “Rationale” reproduced in Section 1 they were most concerned. They felt I had not taken the earlier advice seriously and that I was approaching the task academically rather than in the way they had suggested. After discussing this with me they said that they should have realized that I would go about it in a thorough and disciplined manner. That is my nature. I said that I did not intend to write as I had done in my various books. Helpful guidelines emerged: I should not be obsessive about the task as I am wont to be; I need to be relaxed and reflective and allow my past to speak to me and to listen to it afresh; I should stick to an account of and an exploration of my vocational and spiritual journey; resist temptations to work on new ideas that occur to me, devise and define them without drifting into researching and developing them. (See *Co-consultancy* 32, 10th July 2008). So far I feel I have avoided some of these pitfalls and dangers. After some initial difficulties in finding a suitable writing style and mode, I have found one with which I am comfortable and which is nearer to writing sermons than technical books. But I have not tested it out with others. I am apprehensive about doing so. It all seems so personal. Negative responses would disturb and throw me I think. Must face up to this one!

As to the allied issue, whether I am writing for publication or for my personal and private benefit and well-being, I believe I am making some progress. Significant changes have/are taking place in my inner orientation. A wide, consistent and persistent response to the project has been that it would make a useful publication and they very much looked forward to reading it. Naturally I was flattered and possibly seduced by this. Another response was that it was important to write it for my own benefit whether or not it was published and possibly to do so without having the option of publishing in mind. Those who know me most intimately, have been soul mates and worked with me over many decades, said that it would help me to deal with partially resolved issues of some importance, skeletons in my cupboard. This was something I was fully or painfully aware needed to be done and that doing some of this would have to be done very confidentially and strictly privately. But much of it was not of this kind. At an early stage I think I was playing a deceptive game with myself and others. Overtly I was saying that I was not writing for publication, i.e. I was not approaching it as I would a book I wanted to be published. Inwardly, I was hoping (? intending) that it would be published. The sort of verbal game that convinces no one! Everyone knew that the denial about publishing

is a coy expression of a hidden hope that it will be published! This is where I was when I started writing and it adversely affected my attempts to write. Having half an eye on publishing, as it were, meant I was testing/assessing what I was writing in relation to it being published and what readers would make of it. That was diverting me from dealing and engaging as honestly as I needed and wanted to with the subject matter. Attempts to deny or suppress the half desire to write a book for publication by writing whatever occurred to me by denying and controlling my innate and strong propensity and life line practice of ordering and structuring my material as logically and systematically as I possibly could, led to an impasse, writers' block. My reason for doing this was that I was associating working out time with writing a book. Clearly the device was equally appropriate for writing private notes or memoirs! I was caught in an illogical double bind of my own making! One day in a frenzy of what proved to be creative activity—driven by desperation and frustration—I went over the many pages that I had written in the way I have discussed, structured it, constructed an overview of my vocational life which is now in Section 3 and produced the first draft of the outline to which I am now writing and, as with all my former work, I am modifying and developing as I go along. Now I feel I am really into an honest and workmanlike attempt at writing my vocational autobiography. For the time being at least the publishing/not publishing issue has been resolved in my mind in this way:

CONCLUSIONS ABOUT PUBLISHING AND VALUE OF EXERCISE

- I am writing as best I can a vocational autobiography as a private and personal enterprise.
- Thoughts about publication do surface from time to time but they do not determine what I write, not least because of the points that follow.
- Questions about publication are premature at this stage and should be shelved until I have written what I have to write to do justice to my vocational autobiography and the unresolved issues.

¹²When I was preparing to speak at the Circuit celebrations of the golden jubilee of my ordination at Moortown on the 3rd October 2010, it suddenly came to me that my vocational life was very much like an Emmaus Road journey with Christ: a walk through life in which he was continually opening up the

meaning of things and breaking the bread of knowledge, understanding and revelation. I am now nearing the resting place where Christ will preside over the great Banquet, as a sacrament of death and resurrection.

- Pursuing this task in itself and for itself has its own value and potential.
- Whether or not it is published it will, I believe, achieve something in me and for me and possibly for anyone who reads it.
- Once it is down on paper, it will be easier to decide what if anything should be done with it. Edited it could be published in its entirety or in parts.
- Alternatively it could be used as a resource / raw material for articles, sermons etc.

All this helps me for the time being to put the question of publishing on hold and get on with the writing.

See [Part 2 Appendix](#) for further reflections.

