

Shut Up, Own Your Shit, Be Wrong, and Make Good Trouble

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I was in grade seven. Days earlier I had been forced to sit inside for however many recesses it took to copy out Ephesians 4:17-5:20 because I said “shit,” out loud, in class, at a Christian school. I was still furious. Shit had never been a swear word in my home, it was, I had been raised to understand, ‘simply a fact of life.’ The reason I had yet to complete the mere 35 verses was because I had been doing some extracurricular research instead. The bible I had been given to perform this task had been yanked, without a second glance, from the library shelf by my diminutive, indignant teacher and slammed, with all the aplomb of an atom bomb, in front of me. She was far more concerned with the theatrics of the moment, choosing the thickest and most daunting binding she could reasonably handle, than the study and vocabulary contents of the book itself. She glared at me, her righteous fury offset by our horizontal eyeline, despite the fact that I was sitting, and chirped her desire for this experience to ‘do me some good’ before turning on her heel and storming out. Had it ever! After finding the prooftext she’d hoped would set me straight, I slid my paper in to hold the spot and began to flip through the rest of the book. Gleefully finding a dictionary at the back, I did what every 12 year old troublemaker does and looked for swear words. However, this troublemaker was out for what he considered ‘good trouble.’ If I could find the offensive term that had landed me in this mind-numbing and tortuous position, I would have a prooftext of my own to justify my vocabulary. I can’t remember how I did it, but in my procrastination/research I discovered that in Phillippains 3:8 Paul uses the greek word σκύβαλα, meaning ‘dung,’ or shit. Not only that, the Old Testament prophets, notably Isaiah and Jeremiah, called idols, גִּדּוֹלִים, meaning ‘dung pellets’ or pieces of shit. I was elated. Rather than announcing my innocence forthwith, I decided to wallow in my own brilliance and wait for an opportune moment. Fortune must favour both the bold and the just because the opportunity soon presented itself. Sitting in the fourth row, dreading another tedious turn

at transcription, I looked from the stagnant clock to the chalkboard just in time to see my teacher turn to face us. In doing so, her elbow brushed her desk and a cascade of books and papers tumbled to the floor. “Crap,” she exclaimed in frustration under her breath and dipped the minimal distance to the floor to retrieve them. I seized the moment, stood up, and demanded, “Why can you say ‘crap’ but I can’t say ‘shit’ even though it’s in the Bible?!” Her eyes, already enlarged by her oversized frames, popped like a cartoon owl. Later, sitting in the passenger seat of our red Pontiac dustbuster, looking out the window at the cars and people who go contentedly about their day while children are being indoctrinated, I heard, more than listened to my mother’s exasperated response to my self-righteous rantings. “Kevin, own your shit! Just because you’re right doesn’t always mean you’re right! Sometimes it’s just better to shut up and stay out of trouble, that way you can say what you know when people actually want to listen to you!”

As much as I was reluctant to admit that my approach to long-term professional development as a reflective leadership practitioner can all be related to an event that happened to me when I was a tweenager, I wouldn't be modelling vulnerable, honest risk-taking if I resisted. If I am to be bold and humble enough to call myself a leader, I should do so in the way that makes the most sense to me. Good leaders are those who can mobilize others. Successful leaders mobilize others towards creating something that is “inclusive ... moral ... constructive ... [and] substantial” (Williams, 2005, p. 7). Great leaders cultivate that creative potential by making it mean something beyond the task at hand that can reshape “the horizons of the possible” for those who will follow that creative calling (Crouch, 2008, p. 28). Throughout my life I have exercised both my relational and positional authority in order to mobilize others towards a creative, meaningful purpose. The results, especially in advocacy and education, have often been a blessing to participate in. However, “to lead is to

live dangerously” (R. A. Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 2) and I have also suffered the consequences that trying to change the world can bring. Owning my shit, learning to shut up, admitting that I can be wrong (even when I think I’m right), and saving my energies for good trouble, rather than any opportunity for trouble at all, have been, and still remain, the core of many of those consequences. However, my continued growth in these areas has also led me to the most meaningful results.

If shit is, indeed, a fact of life, here is a big piece of mine: I have ADHD, a neurodevelopmental disorder with contradictory nomenclature that actually provides me with an excess of attention, often on things others do not value. The lack of neurotransmitters actually transmitting in my brain results in mood dysregulation and dopamine deficiencies. As well as a decreased ability to resist impulses, affect good judgement, retain sequences and lessons learned, avoid distractions, and, of course, pay attention to things I am not intrinsically invested in. Taken together, these traits would seemingly preclude me from being an effective learner, nevermind a leader of learners. However, as my grade seven teacher discovered, they simply mean that my learning and leadership skills are formed along different paths than the neuronormative. They also mean that to achieve proficiency in these areas, I need to be deliberate in how I approach tasks and react to changes. I am not shy about my disorder. I use it as an example of ‘things we’d like the class to know’ every year on the first day of school. Leading by example, “stepping up and doing something that feels unsafe and uncomfortable first” (Lencioni, 2012, p. 37), has created an amazing learning environment where my students eventually feel comfortable sharing their own vulnerabilities and learning needs. More examples are the deliberate use of a physical planner every day, trusting my tasks and duties to my pen, rather than my brain, and literally wearing my medication around my neck in a display of both its existence and effectiveness. This demonstrates how relying on, “Checklists and standard operating procedures,” can make me,

“more effective,” despite their seeming simplicity (Gawande, 2007, p. 12). Learning to be overtly vulnerable and open about my strengths and weaknesses has allowed me to, “build real trust,” by “com[ing] clean about who [I am], warts and all” (Lencioni, 2012, p. 35).

Being open and honest, cultivating a comfort with vulnerability, and lacking the self-regulation that leads to the final fruit of the spirit can also mean I don’t know when to shut my mouth. In minor cases this results in affronts to tact or decorum, however, it has also led down a spiral of unprofessionalism, criticism, gossip, fractured relationships, rigid thinking, and a stunted ability to see things as others do. The line between fruitful vulnerability and self-preservation becomes blurred. Being reactive and thinking primarily in polarizing or catastrophic terms can result in oversharing, igniting panic, and, ultimately, making matters worse. These postures, while protective in nature as I try to grapple with the potential losses of any move, ultimately bar me from seeing things from other perspectives and, when viewed in hindsight, are a desperate attempt to align others with only my point of view. “The essence of leadership lies in the capacity to deliver disturbing news and raise difficult questions” even towards oneself (R. A. Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 10). As a leader, I need to be mindful of my triggers and how I respond to them. Constantly reminding myself that I can only control what I am responsible for, first and foremost my mouth, and work down the list from there. Rather than obsessing and sharing, I must work hard “to bear the risks only [I] can see, while continuing to exercise authority that everyone can see” (Crouch, 2016, p. 117) so they do not become paralyzed by the fear of loss as they explore the frontier of possibility. Leaders “who balance the *community’s* vulnerability with their own *representative* authority” can take suffering and transform it into hope (Crouch, 2016, pp. 126–127).

Leading in a school is not only a huge societal responsibility, opening up young minds as gardens of growth and fostering it beyond the tilled soil, it is also a deeply personal and

spiritual one. Children are not just their parent's responsibility, they are also their legacy and treasure. When they enter into a school's sphere, they become a treasured part of that institution's responsibility and legacy as well. This can create beautiful partnerships as parents and teachers work together to foster flourishing through wisdom and independence. It can also lead to passionate conflicts when hopeful visions for a child's future follow divergent paths. As an experienced professional, I may have diagnoses and strategies that will enhance the engagement of my students to which their parents are resistant, or downright opposed. I may also have a method of curriculum delivery that, whether new or tried and true, parents are put off by because it was not part of their educational experience. While my role is to provide clear information so parents can make sense of my approaches and see the value in them, "[s]ensemaking is about contextual rationality" (Weick, 1996, p. 144) and if they ultimately cannot wrap their minds around it, despite my best efforts, I must learn to let it go. I have to be wrong, even when I'm right. Apologies are not foreign to me. Admitting I'm wrong when I'm wrong has made me more and more comfortable with the restorative practices that can keep shame from fracturing a sense of community. The vulnerability of admitting fault can actually provide opportunities for growth and stronger bonds and it keeps the focus of healthy conflict on the ideas, rather than the people. When my truths from my contexts make more sense to me than the one I'm faced to agree with, Heifetz et al. provide a framework for loosening my bonds to the stories I use to make sense of the world:

[O]nce constructed, those stories tend to be treated as facts, not assumptions. Part of the diagnostic work that needs to be done in minimizing missteps in exercising leadership is to make explicit, at least to yourself, the stories you are telling yourself, and then to treat them as assumptions that need to be tested, not as truths. (2009, p. 225)

Of course, this is much more difficult to bear when the ultimate outcome results in a lesser climax than the story I was hoping to tell. The hope here is that, as a leader, I can meet every challenge as an opportunity to explore possibilities, make connections, and share in a creative experience that is enriched by other perspectives, rather than threatened by them.

This approach also enables me to better discern the times when the hill I've chosen is the one I'm willing to die on. Leadership challenges should not be synonymous with trouble, but, as Congressman John Lewis said when commemorating the events in Selma on March 7, 1965, if you're going to get in trouble, "get in good trouble, necessary trouble" (University of Maryland Eastern Shore). There will always be times when the lines between right and wrong are clear. Most often, these are the times when perfect storms of varying conflicts converge. After sifting through the mess and making sense of it all, there will be times when I am compelled to move from authorized authority to informal, even radical, leadership (R. Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 25). In my experience, these are the times when I am being asked to step into the pain and oppression of others, to speak up when voices are silenced, and embrace potential loss as my personal cross. As a teacher, this is often in moments of advocacy for the marginalized, overlooked, or misunderstood, and requires opening up about my personal struggles or standing witness to those of others. Bearing this burden, accepting responsibility for my convictions, words, and actions, and trusting only in the redemptive example I teach about and have put my faith in is meaningful risk, "the most meaningful action, the life that really is life, the flourishing for which we were created" (Crouch, 2016, p. 172). As a leader, these moments are never to be used for personal advancement, but always to prop others up. Lift their heads above the crowd, so they can be seen, heard, and embraced as a meaningful part of their individual and collective stories. If I'm trampled in the process, so be it. In cultivating those who create new possibilities, I fully embrace the words of Jedi Master Yoda

“The greatest teacher, failure is... we are what they grow beyond. That is the true burden of all masters” (Johnson, 2017).

Had my grade seven self known what I have since learned, would I have lept at the opportunity to right a perceived injustice in the midst of my teacher’s vulnerability? Even as someone who espouses the nonexistence of stupid questions, I would be forced to label that as such! Wisdom is not a collection of facts, but a life well-lived. That experience, and the results of other life choices, including thousands of daily microdecisions, have shaped me into the leader I am today and will continue to shape me into the leader I will become. The best leaders are “those who can learn themselves and help others learn how to make meaning” (Schall, 1995, p. 216). I have learned that my vulnerabilities, my “flaws, failures and limitations are in fact paths to true strength” (Crouch, 2016, p. 171), and I will continue to happily and readily share my stories with the authority that I have gained along the way. In doing so, I hope to mobilize others, explicitly and through my example of being accountable, embracing conflicting stories, looking after both myself and those I’m engaged in creativity with, practicing a growth mindset, being who I was created to be, and never forgetting that every human being I share my journey with is my beloved neighbour created to bear God’s image and make sense of that vocation for themselves (even if they swear, or show you up, in class).

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