



IDEAS AND INFLUENCES

Gentle method: from actor training to leadership futures

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Last September I presented a keynote on healthcare and culture change at a practice development conference in Toronto. I spent the whole of day before I left sitting in on a marathon six-hour session at Miriam Laurence's Integrated Acting System studio.

I was grateful to experience a working studio before setting up my own, which I did in January this year. I established the [Hummingbird Actors Studio](#) in Bangor, Northern Ireland, because I love acting, theatre, and film. Another reason is because we need to start experimenting with new ways of thinking about leadership training for long-term culture change. As I'll explain, actor training is for me one of the best places to start reimagining what helpful training might look like.

What strikes me while watching actors in training is the emotional courage they bring to performance – their commitment to vulnerability in the cause of learning. I taught for 17 years at university level, and the height of expectation for students was always that such levels of courage and vulnerability might be a destination for them. Possibly. Occasionally. Hopefully.

For actors, though, it's not a destination. It's the starting point. Seeing actors work with such commitment to emotional awareness, even when only at the beginning of their training, is always inspirational.

In my Toronto keynote I said:

'The biggest driver of change, whether helpful or unhelpful, is the dominant quality of relationship within an environment, the dispositional quality of an environment – how it feels. [...] Until the cultural climate, the personality, of an organisation changes, nothing substantially changes.'

Actor training is designed for two things in particular: the cultivation of presence in high-intensity performance environments, and of long-term dispositional change as an actor develops their craft.

Cultivation of presence and long-term dispositional change are core training needs at an organisational level in culture change work in the high-intensity environments of healthcare, education, and business. The challenge of transforming the cultural climate is the challenge of transforming the emotional awareness of the people who contribute to that climate.

Actor training is an excellent place to start when designing bespoke leadership programmes to train people for long-term dispositional culture change in organisations, institutions and communities.

At the pedagogic heart of the Hummingbird Studio is something we call ‘presence-based learning’, where learning is understood as ‘*increasing or decreasing awareness of being present (here, now, near, and with)*’. This is in contradistinction to what I think of as orthodox ‘resource-based’ approaches to learning, where learning tends to be understood as increasing resources of legitimated information, skills, or knowledge. Here, ‘legitimated’ means issuing from an authority other than oneself. What I like about presence-based learning is first, responsibility and accountability for learning rests primarily on the shoulders of the person developing awareness, and, second, the experience of learning remains pragmatically relevant to the immediate and meaningful personal and personal-social context in which each of us operates.

The distinctive approach of the Hummingbird’s Gentle Method, is also, then, our gateway to leadership. Four elements structure this work:

Mothú [mʰɔhu:]

An Irish word that means ‘to feel’, but which can also mean ‘to sense’. In the context of our work, *mothú* is understood as ‘sensitive presence’ – a fully embodied experience of listening-in-context. In this work, we invite people to sensitive presence through a deepening awareness of hereness, nowness, nearness, and witness.

Caidreamh [kadʲrʲu:]

Another Irish word, normally taken to mean ‘personal contact’ although the deeper sense of the word refers to a particular quality of relationship. For us, *caidreamh* speaks to an understanding of relational dynamics, emotional intensities and the subtleties of power, whether in personal experience or professional working life. In effect, the exploration of *caidreamh* is the exploration of the intricacies of cultural climate.

Dáimh [dʲaivʲ]

Dáimh is a term in Irish that refers to the sense of duty that is felt when a relative, however distant, is in need. In the context of this work, *dáimh* is taken to mean a sense of response-ability within specific relationship contexts, whether in personal life or in a working environment. To practice *dáimh* is to remain accountable and response-able for your own participation within your social ecology, at all times.

Garaíocht [gari:ɔkt]

Garaíocht means, more or less, ‘being actively responsive in an atmosphere of helpfulness’. In the context of our work, *garaíocht* is taken to refer to the optimal conditions for creativity, imagination, interdependence, self-care, and mutual support in personal relationships or professional working life.

With these four principles of Gentle Method, we hope to support people as we all reimagine what leadership can look like in the face of the challenges of culture change ahead of us.

Reference

Miriam Laurence Integrated Acting System. www.miriamlaurence.com. (Last accessed 31st March 2015)

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