



David T. Barnard

Something Unintended: One Experience of Science and Vocation

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I am not aware of a single person (though perhaps there are some) who went to graduate school intending to become a university administrator—department head, dean, director, vice-president or president—yet clearly a good number of those who first become faculty members do eventually move into administration.

I moved toward administrative roles apparently serendipitously after studying computer science. In my first few years as a faculty member, I became a member of a Senate committee at Queen's University that was charged with assessing institutional needs and making a recommendation to the Senate and the administration about the acquisition of a new computing system. This was several decades ago, at a time when shared mainframes (most frequently uniprocessors) still dominated computing environments. The machines that were chosen were invariably compromises among competing interests on campus. The work involved was interesting, exciting, long and hard, so that all involved for the duration of this project developed a mutual respect.

As a result of this work, when the then director of computing decided to leave the university, he stopped me on the street and told me that he would be recommending me for the role! This certainly came as a surprise as I was a junior member of faculty and had no such thing in mind. But as I grew to see how interesting that role could be at that point in the evolution of academic computing, I eagerly responded and was successful in getting the position.

Since then I have also served as head of my academic department at Queen's, as an associate to vice-principals (at Queen's, vice-presidents elsewhere), as vice-president (administration) and president at Regina, as COO of a software company, and latterly as president at the University of Manitoba. Along the way, I have been privileged to have board positions in a number of university sector organizations, in community organizations, and in business and public sector boards.

At one point some years ago, I asked a colleague to take on an administrative role. After thinking about it, he told me that his career had been formed not by the things he had applied to do (many of which he did not get), but by the things that he had been asked to do. They turned out to be very fulfilling, so he agreed to do what I was asking. That is largely true of my own career as well—it has not at any stage really been something that I had planned, but the choices have been responsive to circumstances.

The beautiful story of Abraham sending a servant to find a wife for his son Isaac from among his distant relations is found in the biblical book of Genesis. When the servant meets Rebekah by a well he says, in the words of the King James Bible, "Blessed be the LORD God of my master

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Communication

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Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his mercy and his truth: I being in the way, the LORD led me to the house of my master's brethren" (Gen. 24:27). Or in a more modern translation, the New English Bible, the last clause is rendered "for I have been guided by the LORD to the house of my master's kinsman."

My father loved the fragment "I being in the way, the LORD led me." I remember him telling my brothers and me when I was very young that this is a pattern that the faithful often observe: it can be difficult to know in advance, or even as events transpire, what God might want or intend, but that after the fact, in retrospect, God's acts can be perceived. This can give us comfort when we are experiencing difficulty or stress in our lives, that the divine presence in (and possibly shaping of) life's experiences can eventually be perceived.

Like most bits of wisdom, this needs to be balanced with other truth, namely, that one can—at least to some extent—shape one's life intentionally. In fact, large parts of the Bible give explicit directions to believers about how to live so as to please God and achieve a rich and full life. In other words, we can shape our lives prospectively to good effect, and our lives are not always apparently random sequences of circumstances until meaning becomes clear after the fact.

Let me set this in context with a poem. The American poet David Citino has written a number of poems in the voice of a fictitious Catholic nun, Sister Mary Appassionata. Here are a few lines from "Sister Mary Appassionata Responds to Questions from the Floor."¹

Q.
Can God make a stone so heavy
He can't lift it?

A.
Yes and no.

Q.
If God knows the future
how can anyone have free will?

A.
I'm not at liberty to say.

Q.
What's an eternity?

A.
We haven't the time
to go into that.

Q.
Why did God make us?

A.
Looking and hearing,
tasting and smelling, touching
to wonder. To do what we're
born for, love, to question.

I love the audacity of the first few answers, and then the contrast with the depth of response—of wisdom, really—in the last. We are here to experience the richness of life and to ask the deep questions about meaning.

Here are several things I now perceive about my life. Some of them may be general truths that are also part of your experience, while others may be more specific to mine.

First, my life has been a journey from small theological spaces into increasingly larger ones. I grew up in a very small church, some distance from the mainstream of Christian thought, although I did not know it at the time. I have moved into larger appreciations of my faith and, as a result, to being less confident in stating what I know as theological certainty than when I was younger. I have sometimes misstepped or consciously chosen badly along the way.

Second, I have also journeyed from small intellectual spaces into increasingly larger ones. My father loved to read, but had little education, and so had largely acquired his interests on his own or through the churches he attended in different places during his life. I learned the love of reading and learning from him, though he might be uncomfortable with some of the ideas that seem quite acceptable to me. Along the way, I have added formal study in theology and law to my computer science background.

Third, I have experienced a life I could not have aspired to, because I did not know that it existed. The thrills of computer science as a discipline, of the threefold work of the university (learning, discovery, and engagement in the community), of working on

boards in both the public and private sectors—these have all been wonderful to experience, although they came as surprises rather than as something I had anticipated from childhood.

My final observation is that leading has been a particularly important concept for me—I have been concerned about divine leading in my life, and about my own leadership responsibilities.

I conceive of my leadership job description as comprising these five points: (1) set the tone (namely, how we treat people), (2) work with others to set the direction, (3) employ good people, (4) supply them with the resources they need, and (5) keep yourself and other obstacles out of their way.

I also know that our weaknesses are often our strengths taken to an extreme, and I realize that my characteristic weakness as a leader can be assuming too much and stepping back too far as I attempt to stay out of the way. At times I need a better balance between delegating and holding myself accountable.

When I was about to leave the presidency at the University of Regina, I asked the Irish poet Micheal O'Siadhail to write a poem for me to use at the farewell dinner in June of 2005. We talked at some length about my thoughts on the responsibilities of being a leader, and he then produced a poem titled "Leading," part of which I want to share with you.²

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Hands-on

Headway of a vessel in rhythm;
Let the sea roar and all that fills it,
Still to tune and trim

And believe a crew's feedback
That feeds forward, a kinship of feeling
When to harden or slack,

Trusting nothing can overwhelm,
Wonder of moving in phase and yet
A lone hand at the helm.

3

Handover

To give it all and still the wisdom to know
How things nurtured steer from inside.
To praise and let go,

A stage well run, to call it then a day
And time a perfect handing over.
At the crux of a relay

One peaks as another hits his stride.
A baton slid from hand to hand.
Glory of standing aside.

The excitement of working with others, receiving a "crew's feedback" in the imagery of the poet, and then eventually knowing when the time has come to end one's service in a particular role and experiencing the "glory of standing aside"—these are good experiences that each of us can have in many contexts, and that I have been privileged to have in unexpected ways. ☆

Notes

¹David Citino, *The Book of Appassionata: The Collected Poems* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 1998).

²The complete poem later appeared in the collection *Tongues* in 2010, but is most easily available in Micheal O'Siadhail, *Collected Poems* (Highgreen, Tarsset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2013).

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