LEADERSHIP THAT DISTURBS THE FUTURE: A TRIBUTE TO JOE SAMUELS

Shirley Walters, 5 March 2020

Once upon a time, in 1985 to be precise, a white coated young man popped his head around the door of my ‘caravan’ on the UWC campus. I had just been appointed founding professor of adult and continuing education – they had forgotten to allocate an office so I found a caravan-like `kwikjak` and started work. Very soon there was much activity with students and staff coming and going to collect posters and pamphlets for the next protest – it was 1985 after all; repression was strong and resistance was vigorous. The polite physiology lecturer, sperm researcher, and Catholic student activist, introduced himself, ‘I am Joe Samuels and I am wondering what’s going on here?’ (He has always been a curious man!) Two hours later, after intense conversations about radical adult education, activism and Paulo Freire, Joe left. Its now 35 years later and we’re still talking to one another!

I have entitled my presentation in tribute to Joe, Leadership that disturbs the future. I will argue that Joe is one of these leaders. As the organisational change and leadership guru, Michael Fullan (2001) states: a complex world needs visionary leaders who do disturb the future....

- With moral purpose,
- Who understand change,
- Who stress the centrality of building relationships
- Who are committed to building knowledge, and
- Who create coherence while realising that consistent coherence is a dangerous thing

I will use these five categories to paint vignettes of my understanding of Joe as a leader.

I describe Joe as an `activist bureaucrat` - this may seem contradictory and may upset Joe (sorry Joe) – after all bureaucrats are those people who are understood as technicians who follow the rules and ensure that others do the same. Following the rules is essential as a way of ordering and governing society, however, not all the rules are necessarily fair and just. Therefore, they must be challenged, new policies and regulations developed in order to align with a socially just dispensation. An activist orientation is essential to bringing about change – Joe embodies both sensibilities of bureaucrat and activist – an unusual combination!

Joe’s moral purpose relates to social justice particularly for people who have been oppressed and discriminated against or excluded through political, cultural or economic policies and practices. The SA NQF was very much a project about social justice, including articulation and access for those historically kept out of the system. It has been the major lever within the SA society for promoting lifelong learning for the very young to the ancient. The NQF has contributed to a new vision for education and training for the country. It was therefore unsurprising that Joe left us
at the Centre for Adult and Continuing Education (CACE) after 7 years, to work with Samuel Isaacs the first CEO of SAQA. The NQF originated with a strong moral purpose – it needed visionary thinking, careful and meticulous construction across the full range of education and training stakeholders and sectors. Joe has spent 21 years at SAQA, with the last 8 as CEO, and the question of justice has been his lodestar – Joe is generally quite a tolerant person, but injustice he cannot tolerate.

**Understanding change:** In all my years of work in universities and in civil society, I have been amazed at how few people seem to understand organisational change. I remember one day Joe and I were discussing architectural changes to the CACE building – we had a 3-dimensional model of the building and we were literally moving walls and doors in order to understand how physical changes would influence movement of people and relationships in the use of the building. It was a moment, in this simple practice, of deepening our understandings of how material conditions effect behaviour profoundly both in architectural design and in society in general. Joe understands change strategies. He knows about the politics and the administration around policy development and policy implementation. He recognises that it’s all in the detail - he is prepared to spend hours into the night and day to ensure that the details are in place, that the political relationships are built. He also recognises that building capacity for change is essential – he is a committed adult educator who has emphasised leadership development within SAQA and elsewhere through staff development programmes amongst others. He knows that change takes a long time; that it requires doggedness that incorporates both passion and patience.

**Relationships:** Building organisations, working for change, is about relationship building. I wonder if Joe or Marie or the children, have ever attempted to quantify how many hours Joe has spent in meetings, planning for meetings, following up after meetings – the political, social, and community building work, is something that Joe does naturally. He has a way of gently challenging, cajoling, befriending. While at CACE Joe invested much time and energy into building AETASA to help organise the field of adult education; at SAQA he has been the driving force to build relationships in the SADC region and more broadly to encourage cooperation and coordination of effort.

**Building knowledge:** Under both Samuel Isaacs and Joe’s leadership, the NQF has been recognised as a knowledge project – it challenges hundreds of years of theorising about the relationship amongst education, training and workplaces. It challenges whose knowledge counts, for example, with RPL. The NQF is both an administrative structure and a place for theory building and action research which engages and encourages scholarship. There are several examples but the one I will highlight is the cooperative training course that SAQA and UWC ran entitled ‘Leaders for Lifelong Learning’ – it was a mixed mode course which drew several people from the SADC region including SA to interrogate, study and theorise NQFs and LLL. SAQA leadership approached this as centrally about staff development which encouraged all levels of SAQA staff to be critical thinkers about their work. The joint research
projects with various universities are other essential examples of the building of knowledge which is relevant both to SA and globally.

**Coherence making** – As a leader disturbing the future, within a complex national, innovative education and training project, leaders need to continually ask what are we trying to do, why are we doing it, who will benefit, how do the different pieces of the puzzle fit together? Joe has worked at encouraging everyone to engage with the problems; not to be pressured to have all the answers but to continually be curious – but this is very difficult within an increasingly bureaucratised tight financial regime....... where achieving clean audits is a key measure of success (and SAQA has achieved this every year!); where auditors and lawyers rule. It can be hard to hold the tension for staff to be encouraged to be intellectually curious and at the same time be administratively and technically on top of their game.

Within the contemporary world, learning has never been more important for all life forms – as we navigate the climate crises we have to be Learning, Unlearning, Re-learning – in Amitav Ghosh’s recent book, ‘Gun Island’ he says:

“It must be hardest on Rani (the dolphin), knowing that the young ones depend on her. There she is, perfectly adapted to her environment ... then things begin to change, so that all those years of learning become useless, the places you know best can't sustain you anymore and you’ve got to find new hunting grounds. Rani must have felt that everything she knew, everything she was familiar with – the water, the currents, the earth itself – was rising up against her.” (Ghosh 2019: 106)

As with Rani, all life is having to adapt in order to survive rapidly changing climate. We have to unlearn in order to develop new attitudes, understandings and capabilities for new conditions. **Learning is the work!** We need many leaders who disturb the future – Joe is one of them who has integrated the 5 components with energy, enthusiasm and hopefulness. Joe, we recognise and appreciate the major contributions you have made and we know that you will continue to give leadership that disturbs the future, which is consistent with your moral and ethical purposes.