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Deaning from the Right Side of the Brain

Israel Galindo, *Columbia Theological Seminary*

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I have been a lifelong doodler. In fact, my college class notes look more like sketchbooks than notebooks (and the doodles are the only reason I've kept some of my college notes). Even today pencil and sketchpad are not far from reach in the event an idle moment provides opportunity to doodle. At times doodles have turned into sketches. The graphite drawing below, done several years ago, started as a doodle that eventually became a favorite sketch, which today hangs framed in my study.



"Sharecropper" by Israel Galindo. Graphite on paper 9" x 11"
Copyright (c) Israel Galindo, 1996.

People sometimes say, "Wow, how do you do that?" On occasion my playful reply is, "Well, if you do something every day for most of your life you can get pretty good at it." Drawing helps artists develop a way of seeing things different than most non-drawing people seem able. Artist and teacher Brian Bomeisler was featured in American Artist magazine.(1) Bomeisler (the son of Betty Edwards, author of the best seller Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain)(2) teaches the "Global Skills of Drawing" that help students produce more realistic drawings. In effect, he teaches them the principles that help them see the world as it is as opposed to seeing

the world as they assume it is.

The global skills of realistic drawing Bomeisler teaches include these five skills:

1. The perception of edges called line or contour drawing.
2. The perception of spaces in drawing called negative spaces.
3. The perception of relationships known as perspective and proportion.
4. The perception of lights and shadows called shading.
5. The perception of the whole, which comes from the previous four perceptual skills.

It occurred to me that all five of Bomeisler's skills of "realistic drawing" are applicable to the work of the theological school dean, which sometimes, seems to require as much art as it does skill. Each of those concepts has a corollary when it comes to leadership in the seminary context. I like the corollary because, as deans, one of our tasks in academic leadership is to understand the culture of our schools and how its context affects all those involved: faculty, students, administration, staff, and the churches we serve.

1. Deans need to develop a perception of edges called "boundaries."

One important concept for deans is differentiation in relationship systems. The concept involves knowing where one's boundary of self (which includes our personal identity, thinking, feelings, and responsibilities) ends and another's begins. People who lack a perception of boundaries tend to have a larger pseudo-self than a core self. In times of acute anxiety and reactivity persons who lack the right perception of boundaries can become willful and invasive. A lack of boundaries can also lead to overfunctioning behaviors (and overfunctioning is always willful). Conversely, lacking capacity for differentiation can leave a dean incapable of setting boundaries when others are invasive, demanding, or seductive. Effective deans not only understand boundaries, they are able to set them when needed. For example, healthy deans know the boundaries between the need to service the curricular needs of the seminary, and the desires and preferences of faculty members. Emotionally mature deans know the boundaries between personal self (one's identity) and the pseudo-self (e.g., the "role" of dean) that is appropriately shared with the theological school system. Further, effective leaders know how to draw a line in the sand when dealing with willful persons who lack respect for boundaries.

2. Deans need to develop a perception of what they cannot see, like "negative spaces."

We can relate this point to the capacity to perceive emotional process in the system. You can't see emotional process directly, but you can see its effect on the system and in the individuals that make up the system. Emotional process is the driving force that makes anxious people do what they do when they engage in automatic responses. It is the force that fuels reactivity and the power behind homeostasis. I define emotional process as, "The patterned ways in which an emotional system facilitates the dynamics through which relationships are developed and function in order to maintain homeostasis." Being able to see the "negative space" of emotional process is the ability to focus on how people function in a system, rather than focusing on individual personalities or secondary characteristics (like gender, race, ethnicity, cultural

heritage, or what academic area that person teaches). Leading from “the right side of the brain” yields the ability to perceive an episode of reactivity in the context of the emotional process in the school system (including its cultural and institutional history), as opposed to interpreting it as an isolated instance in time. It is the ability to recognize a triangle when you see it (or when you’re in it) and being able to discern your place in the triangle and the forces that put you there merely by virtue of being the dean.

3. Deans need to develop a perception of relationships.

If deaning is about anything, it is about leadership through the influence of relationships. One of the most transformative moments in deaning happens when deans, as leaders, can re-frame their perception about their relationship with their school and become the positive deviant in the system: that person who can be in the system yet perceive the flow and flux of the emotional process that affects persons within the system. Gaining a new perspective on the nature of leadership and of relationships can be freeing, if not redemptive, especially for those caught in the trap of transferring their own family of origin emotional process issues and patterns onto their work in the position of dean. We tend too quickly to fall into the trap of functioning as if leadership is about control, ensuring results, getting people to do things, or managing an organization. For deans, the realities of leadership, in contrast, are: influence rather than control, integrity rather than results, enabling persons to do their best work, and working toward organizational and institutional development.

4. Deans need to develop the perception of shading.

Moving away from either/or and right-or-wrong thinking is key to better leadership functioning. The power of leading from “the right side of the brain” (and of systems thinking) lies in the ability to engage in imagination. Being able to work with a broad palate of hues and tones of grays, rather than just in black and white, can help the theological school dean entertain options beyond the fight or flight reactivity that is brought on by anxiety in times of crises. The ability to perceive the reality of tones, hues, and shades can help in relationships also. It will help the dean see people in a new light and appreciate that all humans are complex, nuanced, multidimensional, and wonderfully made. It can help deans move beyond the temptation to over simplistically ascribe motives to actions and can help them appreciate the influence of emotional process on people’s function—a process which they themselves often are unaware. The way people function, think, and feel are colored as much by their family of origin, sibling position, emotional maturity, ability to self-regulate, stage of faith, and level of differentiation as they are by “motives” or cognition.

5. Deans need to develop a perception of the whole.

This is what “systems thinking” is all about, developing the capacity to “think systems,” to see the whole rather than the individual parts. Like an artist who can see the whole canvas and envision how all aspects of composition help bring balance and proportion to the whole, deans need to see the system’s patterns, relationships, dynamics, and forces—rather than merely

their effects on its particular objects. Often, it is not what is on the foreground that's most interesting—it is the rest of the components in the "field" that are making us focus on the object of interest that are the most dynamic forces at play. For theological school deans the "field" that makes up the whole includes the position of his or her school within the landscape of theological education, and, the broader field of higher education, something most others in the school system will likely not see as part of their work, nor realize the influences of those broader interconnected systems.

For example, examine the sketch "Sharecropper." If you look carefully you will note that the composition of the sketch uses the classic "triangle" to force the viewer's gaze toward the eyes of the subject—the viewer cannot help but focus there. But since the "triangle" is part of the composition, which is hidden to the eye, most viewers will not be aware of what the "field" of the sketch is forcing them to look at. Deans are most effective when they understand "what is really going on" and know how to perceive what others cannot. The capacity of the dean to gaze beyond the horizon line, and see what others cannot, is what we call vision. Changing our way of seeing in order to develop persistence of vision is hard work. But, like doodling, if you do it every day for a long time, you can get pretty good at it.

1 You can read the article at: http://www.myamericanartist.com/2007/02/drawing_without.html

2 Betty Edwards, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* (Los Angeles, California: J.P. Tarcher, 1989).

<https://wabash.center/2014/02/deaning-from-the-right-side-of-the-brain/>