

Imaginal Education Lecture #2 THE LIFE METHOD

Good Morning. Yesterday we talked a bit about The Times and Imaginal Education. Really it was on selfhood-how you are in control of the images that influence your behavior and how you can be self conscious about the images you beam at others. We also had a bit of fun looking at the unhelpful behavior patterns in our workplaces, the images behind those patterns, and the messages that were reinforcing them. The question that was asked last night was a good one, I think. How do we discover which images people do live out of. Today's talk is on that. It is called the Life Method and it is our major screen for discerning images.

A reading first-now that you know about images, listen to this educator of images. "The Immense Journey" by Loren Eiseley.....Which images came to mind for you during this reading? What image did this person begin with? How did it shift by the end of the event? What shifted it?

The life method-that sounds audacious, doesn't it. How can anyone call something a life method. Well, we have several tests for it and you may recognize them from yesterday's talk. Does it help you see what you have experienced? Does it allow you to walk inside it and around it and begin to reflect on all aspects? Does it give you a way to begin seeing direction?

I was called upon to settle one of the numerous fights of the children of my apartment building. Invariably I have to find the starting point: What happened, what really happened. Then I have to swirl my intuitions: has this happened before? Are you sure no others words were spoken? What did you think was meant by that statement? What do you mean by a threat? And finally, the direction. What are our alternatives? Are you going to keep on fighting? Are you going to return the toy? What are we going to do about this? I sometimes think they come to me only because they want someone to listen to them seriously and to be able to go thru the steps of "thinking it through."

The steps are simple: the objective; the reflective; the interpretive. The objective is sorting out the facts, the basics, the "given." One of my favorite characters in the first human development projects (in 5th City, Chicago, a black urban ghetto) was named George. You have to understand that being the minority colour of white in a sea of black faces was fine as long as you never got into a serious conversation. For when you began to talk to people you began to see the pain of the black, of the poor, and of the city. Well we got nervous from time to time because everyone seemed

to be on the edge of violence all the time. And there were always reports on "a riot" is begining, now taking place, is just over,...And George always stood for the objective. Panic stricken staff would flee to his side. "George, we have to get out of here, there's a riot." George, who had a slow manner of speaking and a pipe would slowly look at you and begin. "How do you know that?" "Because everyone says so." "Bring me someone who was there." "But George, we could all be dead." "How do you know that? Did you see anything? What exactly did you see? What did you hear? Now lets look at this data?" And by that time, everyone had calmed down enough to begin looking at what was real rather than was could be. He was great to have around.

However, the life method is a method for reflection. And there is something beyond the given or just the factual. Do you remember the old radio show, Jack Webb. "Just the facts, Ma'am, just the facts." Well the second step in this process is the reflective. How do you stand inside the situation, analyze the response, swirl the data, and let loose your intuitions. I recall being in India about 12 years ago when 4 of us had arrived in Bombay to set up programmes and the other 3 had left to teach a seminar in some other part of India. The money for my food was supposed to be telexed or something the next day. The next day came and no one knew anything about food and I had very little cash on hand. Sheer panic as I knew I was going to starve to death on the very streets of Bombay. Looking at the objective did me no good-the objective data told me I would starve to death before money . I don't know if other people do this (skip from the objective to the fantasy) but I began working out scenarios on my death(I was much younger then). Who would find me, what note I would leave, what I would be wearing as I lay in hunger on the floor of the house. After three days of this I finally remembered our method and began to look beyond the "objective" to the reflective. How did I get into this situation? What was the understanding when the other 3 left? Now they assumed that they could leave me to figure it out. Why? What are the values they expect me to hold. One, don't go begging in street as first choice. Don't sit around and think of ways to starve to death. Don't invent intent of malice on part of colleagues. And, oh yes, what are the values of being the solitary who can solve any problem, where nothing is impossible.

Well, I don't know why but just going thru the exercise of looking inside or standing back from the objective and trying to get inside the data rather than being victimized by it, broke something loose. I was able to see into the situation with a set of value screens rather than surrendering to the inevitable.

And now the interpretive. Where do we go from here? What are the decisions that can be made? What are the implications of all this. I want you to know that I didn't starve and that the American Embassy is very nice to naive young women who are stupid enough to find themselves without money in a strange city.

In the ICA we have a particular assignment process we go through to arrive at the right staff for the right place. And we make all assignment for the year in August. In the middle of the year, we had our staff in Nigeria run out of their visas and had to have a replacement. I was sent a note by the assignment commission to bring my 3 candidates names to the meeting. When I arrived, the head of the commission went thru the life method. First, instead of asking for our names, she had us review the data about Nigeria, its geo-social situation and our involvement in it. Then she had us list the values, based on this data, on who needed to be there. What kind of people with what kind of experience. (At that point, I tore up my names as I realized that I had not gone over this with as much care and had in fact, left out the objective and reflective levels.) We then proceeded to choose people who fit that value screen. Now that was the most effective use of the life method I have ever seen. And it started me thinking again why we use this method.

This is a foundational method. For whatever reason, we as humans, seem to want to avoid one, two, or all three of these levels. And yet, they give us images of how to proceed in the most relevant way.

Take the objective level. Looking at our limits, our boundaries, where we are really at. And the reflective. Looking at the possibilities within the given situation and taking it inside ourselves rather than trying to find ourselves in a fantasy situation or denying the situation ever exists. And the interpretive. This is the question, I think, of our life style, the decisions upon us, the real options, the demands to move into the future.

This is also called the life method because we all know how to skip around them. Have you ever talked to someone who always started with the reflective pole. I have one friend who starts off by how excited she is and she gets all of us excited until I realize that I am not really sure what the subject is-she skips over the objective. One elder in our building came up to my colleague the other day and began telling him in no uncertain terms why she wasn't going to put up with

this any more. She had to clean up after it and had to go find the scales again and it just wasn't fair. It took considerable effort to get her calmed down enough to find out what the subject was. And as we thought about it, most of her tirades began with the reflective, the value pole. This is a dangerous pole because it the pole of the charismatic leader, the one who gets you inside his enthusiasm but doesn't always let you know what the issues are.

And the interpretive pole, the level of decision. Have you ever known anyone who is proud of his or her decision making quality? We have one turkey who calls us to let us know what he has decided. And I almost always fall into his trap of going along with his presupposition that decision is the key. We finish the conversation on the phone and I kick myself. All I have done is take down all the decisions he has made and demand that we make. I forgot to ask him for all the objective data or for his values and priorities that would help us make a decision and I was too much of a coward to tell him of our priorities at the time. So I left out the objective and the reflective and tried to slide by on the interpretive.

And the objective pole. How many of you have one person in your workplace who will not move unless "all the data is in." I think people who collect must fall into this category. More data, more items. We don't know enough to make a decision. And you are standing on one foot saying: we will never know all the data but we need a decision now.

It is also intriguing how we use two against the other. My favorite is going from the objective to the interpretive. Someone calls us and says "We need 3 staff immediately in Detroit for a seminar. Send them." And I say: "YOU, you, and you go." Straight to the interpretive. Until someone says "Why"-getting at the missing reflective.

Another favorite is ignoring the interpretive all together. I have been in meetings where we have spent hours looking at the objective situation and even doing talking papers on our value screens and priorities and then walk out of the meeting without even one decision.

It is harder to leave out the objective but it can be done. We had a staff member call in last September about a wonderful opportunity to provide training and offer a service to ten communities who wanted to use our methods. She got everyone excited and someone made a decision to go ahead and set up the program, which got us into more trouble when it came time to deliver. After wading through the wonderful and

exciting advantages and making the hard headed decisions needed to provide the staff for this event, someone discovered the actual contract has not been signed. Back to the objective.

If we use this triangle, I think the great gift of the objective is being able to discern the given situation. There is a quote on my wall that says: "The earth gives you nothing; it simply sits there and waits. It neither loves you nor hates you, but it does cooperate with those who are not afraid." The difficulty with staying on the objective is, of course, inertia. The fear of moving beyond.

The gift of the reflective is being able to stand inside the situation, walk around it, embrace it, say yes to it, and know it in all its aspects. The problem is getting caught up in immediacy or becoming a charismatic leader.

The gift of the interpretive is being able to focus your direction out of multiple views rather than the urge to decide. The danger is dictatorship.

How is this method used? Our workshop later is going to be on this but there are three major ways we use it. The first way is to give us a method to think through a situation before it happens; perhaps a conversation, a proposal, or just standard operating procedures. A second way is to reflect on events corporately so we have a common understanding of what has happened. And a third way is in asking questions.

We did this course with medical people one time and the head nurse held a conversation on how to deal with crisis situations in the hospital. The week before they had lost a child on the floor and she wanted to create the rationale for what conversation she should have had. So the group created these questions:

Objective: How do you know the child is lost? Who was the last person to see her? Where was she last seen? When was she last seen? What was her condition? Could she walk far? How old is she?

Reflective: What is the pattern of this child? Is she known to walk off? Where does she usually walk off to? Do we have a time limit when this child must be found relative to her health that would tell us if we need to push the panic button? In the last place she was seen, are there dangerous things near by in which a full scale search would be made necessary? Are her parents hysterical and threatening to take some action that we must deal with now? What has been our past policy when this has happened? If we follow this option,

what are you most afraid of? What are the worst possibilities we need to look at? What are the most likely harmless possibilities you can think of?

Interpretive: What are our options in this situation relative to the conditions we have outlined? Without giving into panic but quickly taking charge, what should be our next step? What is our common story that we tell to everyone who asks questions? What is our present story line to the parents.

Some of these answers were really funny, especially as it was pointed out that these procedures needed to be thought out ahead of time since in this kind of crisis, you needed to move fast. Also you may have noticed that some of the questions the group came up with moved back to the objective for clarity but were still trying to do the reflective job of getting inside the situation. Relative to this story, the hospital found that it was a kidnap by the child's grandmother who was against the parents medical policy.

Another colleague tells me that he uses this method to understand the proposals or documents that come to his desk. He jots down his answers relative to the format of "It seems to me that your basic issues are...Your values seem to be...And what you are requesting is...If you would take this back and clearly state why this issue is key...broaden your values to include...and think through the implications of these demands."

This method is great for lecture building. I generally start with a title and then try to find the stories that illustrate my point. After I brainstorm enough raw data I go back to the major question of "What am I really after in this lecture? And how am I going to illustrate it so they get inside the subject (the reflective) and not just hear it intellectually. And what are the implications or demands I am going to put on them at the conclusion." Now if I write a good lecture and do the first two steps adequately (the objective and reflective), the last step becomes obvious or indicative as we sometimes call it. If I leave out the first two steps and give it on the interpretive level, it becomes something like head beating or good advice. The same is true in a story or a joke. The key is the reflective or getting them inside the story before you give the punch line.

Now let's do one on events. Let us take last night's workshop.

Objective: What do you remember from last night. What stood out for you?

Reflective: What was the funniest thing that happened? When did we get real serious? When were you ready to quit? When did you feel like we could do this forever? (all these questions get you inside the event last night as a participant rather than a spectator.)

Interpretive: What is one thing that the evening said to you? If you could talk back to the evening, what would you say to it? How would you title the evening: It was a great evening of...

Now what happens when we do something like this? We begin to tell the story commonly of ourselves. And in terms of motivity, being able to create a common story of what you do, especially in your workplace, this is a key tool. People will continue any task as long as they see themselves with an adequate story for why they are doing it or how it is significant.

Now, one more. Let's do a consensus format using this life method.

There is a budget cut in our media and publication department. The word processor and the xerox machine have been used excessively. Each department must come up with a model of future use of these machines.

Objective: What are some of our options. Let's put each on the board here.

Reflective: What are our foundational principles behind each option? Which of our principles are we violating or weakening with these options?

Interpretive: What is the new move or our bold stance if we go this way? Could we combine several elements of the options? What is our consensus? If we don't have a consensus, let's look at our values again? O.K.

Now, for the phone. Someone calls you and says: "We must create this training program for thenow. What are your objective questions? How will those give us the data we need? What are your reflective questions? Will these get us inside the data as a participant rather than a spectator? What are your interpretive questions? Do they focus your direction?"

We won't do it but it would be fun for you to analyze your family arguments using this screen. Who always comes back to "Let's stick to the issues." And who always says "You don't understand how important this is?" And who says: "Could we just make a decision and move on with this."

Well this is a life method because it reminds us of that which we sometimes forget. On the objective: there is no one reality, there are different perspectives which we need to look at to see the real "given" situation.

On the reflective: our values change and the only chance we have to make decisions of authenticity is to get our priorities, or things without which life is not worth living.

On the interpretive: unless our decisions are coming to a dead end, how do we ethically make decisions that have looked at all alternatives and are based on relevant priorities?

Well, this lecture is very much like the one last night. It is on selfhood and how you be in control of your life. This particular method enables us to be those who think through and thus to focus the journey that never ends--the journey of your life to pick your way thru painful alternatives and to be satisfied that you live out of authenticity.

We want to move into our workshop groups now and write our own questions. This sheet of the three by three questions might enable you to see some of our traditional questions that we have asked but feel free to create your own.