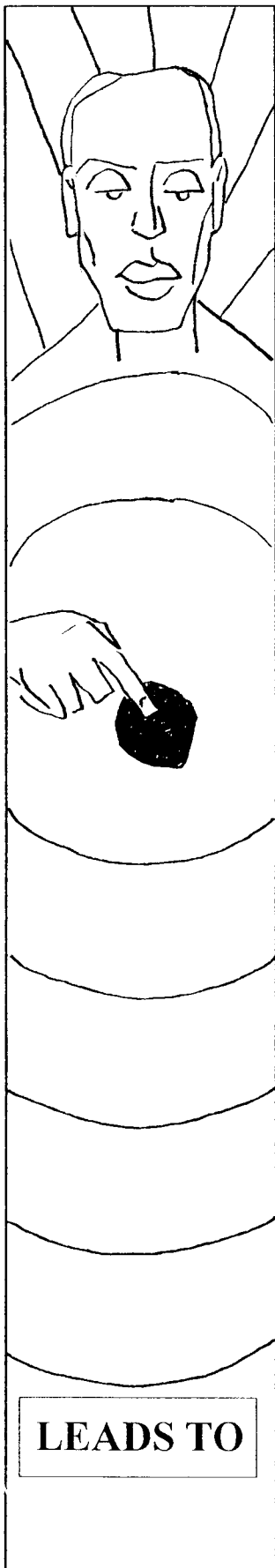


Some time ago, I was the leader catechist for a group of little children, about six or seven years old. I was using a picture of a huge, strong tree in full sunshine. I was trying to entice the group into relating to the strong tree growing in the light. It was an Easter session and I was on my way to a session on being happy, growing in the light and eventually to being happy in the light of Christ. However, that day, the progression got stuck. One little girl discovered in the corner of the poster a tiny, tiny red object. It so happened that it was a barn. There was no way we could go on until we stopped to talk about the barn and the animals that lived there. Little by little we got the animals out of the barn and back under the tree. Then we were able to start out again on our tree in the light journey.

I thought of this experience when I read the account of a young man named Peter in the recent book by Malcolm Gladwell, Blink, The Power of Thinking Without Thinking.<sup>1</sup> The book itself studies the process of intuition which involves filtering out data from a situation so as to focus on what is important. He situates the part of the brain that functions during this process as being behind the nose in the ventromedial area, and he asks what happens if this area is damaged and thus he tells the story of Peter.<sup>2</sup>

Peter is very intelligent. However, he also has autism. People with autism have a wide range of capabilities but they often have difficulty interpreting emotions and the expressions of other people. They are apt to get caught up in irrelevant data. In this particular experiment, Peter is fitted with a head device that has two cameras. One camera keeps track of the center of Peter's eyes and the other keeps track of what is going on outside Peter, in this case, the movie, Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf. Elizabeth Taylor is playing Martha and George Segal is playing Nick. At a key moment in the film, when Martha and Nick kiss, the camera follows Peter's eye movements. He completely by-passes Martha and Nick to study the light switch behind them. He likes light switches!

Those of us in Spred know that during a catechesis using a symbolic approach, there could be a circle of Peters in front of us. On top of that, with a symbolic progression, we begin with a fair amount of information to evoke the life experiences of those in front of us. This allows a session to be interesting and creative. The process is enriched by the various hues brought to the experiences. However, at some point the leader has to begin to pull in the data. This means that some information has to be left aside. There are times when it is impossible to drop some data, like the tiny barn next to the big tree.



With our friends who have disabilities, it is not respectful to just plow on ahead. Besides they will quickly find a way to let us know that they are not with us. We need to take **time** to work with the situation. When someone cannot filter out data in order to focus on what is important, the educator works gently to redirect attention. This involves both a skill and an art form.

Sessions for Spred groups are deliberately written in a stripped down fashion to give a very clear focus. The enrichment and multiple details come from the group in an inductive process. Yet the leader has to **lead** the group along a given path.

In the Method Vivre, used in Spred, this given path is called the intentionality of a session. It is one thing to write, read and understand the intentionality of a session. It is quite another to find one's way into the intentionality in the fire of a session and also bring a group along the same path. When this happens, the leader is functioning with intuition more than with anything else.

For intuition to be fruitful, two elements are necessary, time and limited data. These elements are connected. Sufficient time is necessary to get a grasp of the pattern at play. For this reason, the pace of a session is crucial. If the leader goes too quickly, the true data offered by the group members is not really respected. The leader goes on a head trip. But if the leader goes too slowly, the details pile up. When more and more details accumulate, both the leader and the group get lost in the swamp. We have all had moments of panic when we feel we are all alone out there and do not have a clue how to find firm ground.

If the intentionality is firmly in place, two things happen. First of all, the group settles down. By the leader articulating the intentionality quite simply, everyone has one thing to focus on and so they become still. It is a moment of intuition. But because our friends with disabilities have to be helped to focus, the leader has to be clear and level headed during this moment of intuition. The support of each Helper catechist or Sponsor is essential at this point. This point of rest is called the Interiorization.

Then, secondly, the group is primed to move on. Following the line of the intentionality, the liturgical and biblical evocations take place. These evocations treat some aspect that is common to the focus given in the intentionality.

The Method Vivre is also used in the adult preparation sessions for catechists that take place before each session with our friends. In the adult preparation session, the intentionality is very obvious.

The catechists come together in a circle and the leader reads a story, often times from the daily newspaper. In any story, there are several patterns. As soon as one pattern is chosen for the syllabus, the story is tilted in one direction rather than in another five or ten possible ones. Thus the data of a story is narrowed down and filtered so as to give a certain focus. To check that this focus has universal application, there is a summary statement to again show the pattern that has been chosen. Then based on this pattern, this summary, the question is posed. Everyone mulls over the question and shares a story from lived experience. As these stories are shared in the celebration room, the same pattern appears as each one speaks. The moment of interiorization emerges as the pattern becomes more and more obvious.

With a firm foothold in this pattern, interiorized by everyone in the group, the session moves beyond the evocation of the human experience and the interiorization toward mystery that is playing out in my life and in the lives of the others in the community of faith. Then there is a moment of contentment and prayer.

To see how this works, let us look first at the adult preparation session for catechists and then at the companion session with our friends. The Method Vivre is not an instructional form of catechesis. It involves a series of evocations that hang together on the thread of the intentionality.

Beauty in Life (Adult Preparation Session for Catechists, Session 5, 11-16 series, 2007.)

The goal of this session is to become aware of how living things become beautiful when we care for them.... We care for and are cared for in the community in which we live. As members of the People of God, we know that we are cared for by a loving Father in his Holy Spirit who is love.

The leader reads a story by Kent Nerburn, Small Graces, New World Library, Novato Ca. 1998 "I have not always loved gardens. They seemed too controlled and futile. I was blind to their beauty and their teachings. It took a friend of mine, a Jesuit priest, to open my heart to their beauty. He was a deeply learned man, spoke many languages and had earned many advanced degrees.... Inside a small yard, day by day, on hands and knees, he would lovingly pluck a leaf, bend a twig, place a stone or trim a branch until a new and unexpected shaft of light showered down and danced its magical dance upon the earth. He now spent more time with his garden than he did with his books.... He pointed to a sliver of sunlight beaming down upon the branches of a tree. "I opened this to the sun last year. See how the branch is turning to the light."..."Are any of us so different from this tree - strong, full? And who among us does not grow and prosper when someone shines even the smallest bit of sunlight upon us?"

Summary Statement: The author learns to enjoy the beauty of gardens. He watches his friend take care to make way for a sliver of light to shine on the plants and trees. Everything turns toward the light.

Universal Statement: When we care for life, we see beauty.

Question for Reflection: Describe an experience of discovering beauty when care is taken.

(In the child's session, we begin by talking about taking care of a plant in the room, and go on to evoke taking care of our pets and people in our lives. The Interiorization is : When we care for one another, we are happy to be together. We become beautiful. Our friends become beautiful. We are at peace with one another.)

In both the adult preparation session and in the session for our friends, in the liturgical evocation, we talk about a time when we prepared the altar for the presentation of the gifts. How beautiful it became. The biblical evocation is from Colossians 3:12 "You are God's chosen friends. He loves you. You are to be clothed with kindness, gentleness and patience. May the peace of Christ reign in your hearts." "Jesus says to you today, I give you my peace."

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1 Malcolm Gladwell, Blink, The Power of Thinking Without Thinking, Little Brown and Co. New York 2007  
2. Ibid pg. 59

