



# A Leader is a Dealer in Hope

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I once heard it said that Leadership doesn't have a user's manual but that learning from the leaders we know is the next best thing. I want to propose to you that the leader from whom we can learn the art of leadership is Catherine McAuley. I believe that she can teach us more about leadership than any user's manual ever could.

The title I chose for this talk is **A Leader is a Dealer in Hope**. I had two reasons for choosing the title

1. Our world today needs hope. News channels are saturated with 'bad news. – Wars, financial calamities, suffering, etc. We long for leaders – political social and religious – who can inspire us and animate us in responding.
2. Two hundred years ago, a news broadcast would probably cover more or less the same topics and we can point to people who were dealers in hope in these situations – among them Catherine Mc Auley.

Lets for a moment think of the Ireland that Catherine inhabited. We don't have television footage to view but fortunately we do have some drawings. And better still, they were drawn by a woman called Claire Agnew, who was one of the first Mercy Sisters. These are not just imaginative drawings. We know that Catherine took Claire with her as she ministered to those in need in her day.

## Man by the Roadside

In this drawing, we get a glimpse of the poverty that was widespread. One historian described it like this – *The poverty of the day was utterly incredible, so wretched and miserable was the lot of many. Extreme poverty with its attendant afflictions of hunger and disease had left the people destitute*

## Family in Cellar

Here is a household scene. Claire tells the story behind this picture. The father had died leaving the family without a breadwinner. The mother and children lived in this damp cellar, where behind the empty casks they all lay under one tattered blanket. Scenes like this caused one English traveller, describing his visit to Ireland to write: *I spent a day visiting those parts of the city where the greatest destitution and misery were said to exist. I entered upwards of forty of the abodes of poverty; and to the latest hour of my existence I can never forget the scene of utter hopeless wretchedness that presented themselves that day.*

### Starving crowds

As is still the case, women and children suffer most wherever there is poverty. Children of the poor had no educational opportunities and so were caught in a cycle of poverty. Child labour or begging which often landed them in prison was their lot. Prison records show that children as young as eight were sentenced to a punishing and harsh regime for begging on the streets and mothers who had no source of income to buy food were regularly imprisoned for long periods for stealing food their starving families.

### Sick person in bed

Disease was rampant. The most common disease was consumption or TB as we know it today. In 1839 over 8000 people died in Ireland from this disease. Poor nutrition, damp and unsanitary hovels and overcrowding were the main causes. Typhus was the second largest killer, a disease spread by lice and unhygienic conditions.

### House in disarray

As sometimes happens in situations of poverty and despair, men seek refuge in drunkenness. In the early 1800s drunkenness was regarded as the prime cause of broken homes, poverty, and social strife in Ireland.

We could go on but this selection gives us a glimpse of the Dublin of the 1800s

Referring back to the title, dealers in hope - I was quite surprised that what hope means in its indo- European root is to change direction, going in a different way. In Catherine's day, everyone was aware of the conditions in Dublin— a city where the very few were wealthy and the many were poor, pathetically, desperately, unbelievably poor. And in this dire and dark world, few thought anything could be done; some thought nothing should be done but Catherine thought differently and was prepared to go a different way. She became a dealer in hope. She did this by her courage and her contagious concern for the poor, the sick and the uneducated in such a way that she broke through the impossibilities of her time. As a dealer in hope, she animated many to walk with her. She animated others at centres of wealth, power, and influence to share in her heroic efforts.

How did she do this? She did it because she was able to show people what is possible when you change the way you look at the world. Catherine didn't go to business school. She didn't read a manual 'How to be a Good Leader in 10 Easy Steps'. But she had qualities we'd all recognise. She had passion, compassion, commitment. She risked going beyond her comfort zone. And she inspired other people to try to connect with worlds they didn't know existed before, to build bridges that would connect the rich to the poor, the healthy to the sick, the educated and skilled to the uninstructed, the influential to the excluded, and the powerful to the weak.

It is tempting now to look at our world today, to enumerate its problems, to draw parallels to Catherine's day and to suggest ways in which we could emulate her in responding to the needs around us. I would like to take a step further back and look at what made Catherine the leader she was. I recently read a book 'Start with Why' by Simon Sinex on how great leaders inspire action. He says that most people can tell you what they do and how they do it but very very few can tell you why they do what they do, what belief inspires them, what is it inside them that urges them to do what they do, what is the driving force that guides everything they do. But he says the inspired leaders and the inspired organizations -- regardless of their size, regardless of their industry -- all think, act and communicate from the inside out. So let's see what was Catherine's WHY and, what was it that she communicated from the inside out that made her the inspirational leader she was and then perhaps we can make her WHY ours as well.

As I reflected on what Catherine communicated from the inside out, I was reminded of a very famous Jewish story. Perhaps you have heard of it. It is called Tikkun Olam which translated means 'repairing the world'.

At the beginning of time, God's presence filled the universe. When God decided to bring this world into being, to make room for creation, He first drew in His breath, contracting Himself. From that contraction darkness was created. And when God said, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3), the light that came into being filled the darkness, and ten holy vessels came forth, each filled with primordial light.

In this way God sent forth those ten vessels, like a fleet of ships, each carrying its cargo of light. Had they all arrived intact, the world would have been perfect. But the vessels were too fragile to contain such a powerful, divine light. They broke open, split asunder, and all the light was scattered.

These pieces lodged as shards inside every aspect of Creation. And the highest human calling is to look for these shards of light, to point at them when we see them, to gather them up, and in so doing to repair the world.

Catherine saw Jesus as the light. She saw that light in every person she met and she believed that she also brought that light to every person she met. This was what Catherine communicated from the inside out. This was her WHY her part in healing the world. She radically believed the words of Jesus firstly about herself – You are the Light of the world. She understood that she was God's light to everyone she met but she equally believed that in each one, she met Jesus the Light. And that in relating with them she was relating with Jesus – 'As long as you did it to one of these the least of my brothers and sisters, you did it to me'.

The Tikkun olam story and the example of how Catherine embodied it are empowering stories for mercy leaders today because they teach us that each and every one of us, inadequate as we may feel has exactly what's needed to repair and heal that part of the world we touch.

If the story of WHO for Catherine was the conviction that she carried the light of Christ to a world in need and that she encountered that light in the lives of all she touched, then the story of HOW must be the path she chose to do it. That path was Mercy. Another great Mercy artist gives us an insight into how Catherine and her followers understood Mercy. In her artistic expression of the word she embellishes the letter M. Looking closely at it you will see that she depicts the story of the Good Samaritan. When I think about that story, the word that always comes to mind is 'Compassion' and it is I think a doing word for Mercy. A definition of compassion that I particularly like is this: *'The sensitivity to another's suffering and the corresponding will to free the other from that suffering'*. Could we find a better description of Catherine herself?

The definition I have just quoted sounds simple enough but in practise is quite demanding. Sensitivity demands empathy and empathy demands that we move outside our own concerns. It clearly calls us beyond self preoccupation and selfishness.

Here is a story that proves how difficult it is for some of us to move beyond our own concerns. It was actually a study that was done a while ago in Princeton Theological College in the US.

A group of divinity students at the College were told that they were going to give a practise presentation and they were each given a topic. Half of those students were given, as a topic, the parable of the Good Samaritan- the man who stopped to help the stranger in need at the side of the road. Half were given other random Bible topics. Then one by one they were told they had to go to another building and give the presentation they had prepared. As each of them went from the first to the second building, they passed a person who was bent over and moaning, clearly in need. The question is: Did they stop to help?

The more interesting question is: Did it matter that they were contemplating the parable of the Good Samaritan? Answer No: not at all. What turned out to determine whether someone would stop and help a stranger in need was how much of a hurry they thought they were in – were they feeling they were late, or were they absorbed in what they were going to talk about.

So what does this study highlight: it draws our attention to the fact that whether or not we respond to the need of another is very much connected with our ability to transcend our own needs in favour of another, to be wholly present to another.

Catherine has much to teach us in this regard.

Listen to how one of Catherine's companions, Teresa White described her: gift of being wholly present to others, of making them feel accepted by and important to her, *"There was something about her so kind yet so discerning that you would fancy she read your heart. If you came to speak to her of the most trifling matter, although occupied with the most important affairs, she would instantly lay all aside and give you any satisfaction in her power."*

What are the lessons we can learn from the Princeton College experiment and from the description of Catherine. The circumstances of our lives can be quite like that of some of the students. The simple fact is, if we are focussed on ourselves, if we're preoccupied, we don't really notice the other. And the difference between the self and the other focus can very subtle but this distinction is key to compassion. The Harvard Business Review recently had an article called 'The Human Moment' about how to be present to a person. And they said the fundamental thing you have to do is turn off your phone, close your iPad, end your daydream and pay full attention to the person. Empathy, the foundation stone to compassion, is our tuning in to another. When we focus on ourselves, we tune ourselves out of the other's world. Compassion can express itself in the simple act of presence – just being there, just showing up when another is in need.

I bet it would surprise you if I said that Albert Einstein has something to teach us about compassion. We hear a lot about his scientific genius. We hear less about the Einstein who foresaw that as we grow more modern and technologically advanced, we need the virtues like concern for others more not less. He liked to talk about the spiritual geniuses of the ages – Jesus, Frances of Assisi, Gandhi. Had he known Catherine McAuley, I am sure she would have made his list. This is what he said of such people: *These kinds of peoples are geniuses in the art of living, more necessary to the dignity, security, and joy of humanity than the discoveries of objective knowledge.'*

So what Einstein is saying is that for all the wonderful contribution that scientific discoveries make to our world, the contribution of the geniuses in the art of living that is those who contribute virtues like love, compassion, hospitality are even more necessary.

Compassion is a learned art. It's never in the first instance about changing the world, it's about changing ourselves. Changing our hearts

Notice the elements of compassion

**C**aring for others who are hurt

**O**pen your heart to those in need

**M**ake time to listen to those in sorrow

**P**ass on the kindness to others

**A**ctions speak louder than words

**S**mile when someone needs one

**S**ympathise with others in trouble

**I**nclude others who are left out

**O**ffer to help someone who is sad

## Necessary for a peaceful world

When we act like this, we dethrone ourselves from the centre of our world and we put another person there.

And once we do that, we're ready to look for the face of God in the moment of suffering, in the face of the stranger, in the face of the one in need.

That is exactly what Catherine did, she saw the Christ reflected in everyone in need and considered it a privilege to respond

Our own experiences of need or suffering can also teach us compassion. The Dali Lama often states that compassion is his best friend. It helps him turn away from his own concerns and broadens his awareness of the suffering of others.

Catherine learned compassion by using the experiences of her own life to understand and empathize with the sufferings of others. After the death of her parents, Catherine had felt what it was to be an orphan, to be without any income, and when her Uncle with whom she was staying, became bankrupt, she even knew what it was to be cold and hungry. When she went to live with the Armstrongs, she felt what it was like to be an outsider to their religion and beliefs, to have a feeling of not belonging. At the Callaghan's, she felt what it was like to rely on the goodness of others to provide her with a home. Reflecting on these experiences became the springboard of Catherine's loving outreach to others. Born of her own experience she found within herself a mother's heart for the 9 orphans she adopted and was already caring for before she inherited the Callaghan estate. Knowing what it was to fall from wealth to poverty, she had a particular sensitivity for those who had known better days. Having had the experience of being an outsider made her extremely conscious of including everyone, something that greatly endeared her to her Sisters and others and knowing what it was to rely on others for a home led her to providing a home for vulnerable women in the first house of Mercy.

Compassion is a paradoxical mixture of strength and gentleness. It takes tremendous strength to uphold yourself in the midst of difficult experiences. But it also takes a gentle spirit and undefended heart to respond lovingly to need.

## The What

We have looked at the Story of Who in Catherine's leadership— who she was from the inside out. We have looked at the story of HOW – the Human Moment person who in spite of her own concerns could transcend herself to emphasize with others in their needs and now we want to address the WHAT of her leadership.

All of us can answer that in one sentence. She cared for the poor, sick and neglected. If you were to ask Catherine what in her experience were the things these people valued most about what she did— what do think she might say? Perhaps you might expect she would say

things like education for their children, shelter for the homeless, health care for their sick. But strangely that is not what she said but rather 'What the poor prize MOST is the kind word, the compassionate look and the patient hearing of their sorrows'.

I underline this because sometimes we may think that Mercy Leadership is only about big projects that address the enormous world issues and that we need to engage some big project to address these issues. Catherine didn't start with a grand plan. She started with what presented itself in her immediate surrounds – the needs in her own family and in her own locality.

Here's a story that has helped me to redefine the 'what' of leadership and the way we can be leaders in the most ordinary of circumstances. It was told by a man called Drew Dudley who speaks about "Leading with Lollipops"

It was Drew's last day in College and a girl came up to him and she said, "I remember the first time that I met you." And then she told him a story that had happened four years earlier and this is what she said: I was standing in line getting ready for. I was so scared and so convinced that I couldn't do this, I felt I wasn't ready so I decided to opt out. But just as I made the decision you came out of the Student Union building wearing the stupidest hat I have ever seen in my life." And you had a big sign promoting Shinerama, which is Students Fighting Cystic Fibrosis and you had a bucketful of lollipops. And you were walking along and you were handing the lollipops out to people in line and talking about Shinerama. And all of a sudden, you got to me, and you just stopped, and you stared. It was creepy." And you said: This girl right here knows exactly what I'm talking about. "And then you looked at the guy next to me, and you smiled, and you reached in your bucket, and you pulled out a lollipop, and you held it out to him, and you said, 'You need to give a lollipop to the beautiful girl standing next to you.'" "I have never seen anyone get more embarrassed faster in my life. He turned beet red, and he wouldn't even look at me. He just kind of held the lollipop out." "And I felt so bad for this guy that I took the lollipop, and as soon as I did, you got this incredibly severe look on your face and you looked at those around me, and you said, 'Look at that. Look at that. First day away from home, and already she's taking candy from a stranger?!'" (Everyone started to howl laughing and somehow in that moment I knew that I shouldn't quit. I knew that I was where I was supposed to be, and I knew that I was home, and I haven't spoken to you once in the four years since that day, but before you leave I want you to know what an incredibly important person you have been in my life, and I'm going to miss you. Good luck."

And she walks away, Drew is flattened. And she gets about six feet away, she turns around and smiles, and goes, "You should probably know this, too. I'm still dating that guy four years later."

A year and a half after he got an invitation to their wedding.

Now here's the interesting thing Drew has no memory of the lollipop incident. And that was such an eye-opening, transformative moment for him to think that maybe the biggest impact he'd ever had on anyone's life, a moment that had a girl walk up to a stranger four years later and say, "You've been an incredibly important person in my life," was a moment that he didn't even remember.

I bet every one of you here have had a lollipop moment – a moment when you made life better for someone by what you said or did.

Drew Dudley acknowledges that it is scary to think of ourselves as that powerful. It can be frightening to think that we can matter that much to other people, because as long as we make leadership something bigger than us, as long as we keep leadership something beyond us, as long as we make it about changing the world, we give ourselves an excuse not to expect it every day from ourselves and from each other.

Nelson Mandela said, "Our greatest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our greatest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, and not our darkness, that frightens us."

Catherine knew how extraordinarily powerful we can be in each other's lives by the kind word, the compassionate look, the patient listening to each other. We need to value the impact these simple gestures can have - more than money and power and titles and influence.

We need to redefine leadership as being about lollipop moments. Dudley's concluding remarks are that if we made leadership about changing the world, we can be overwhelmed, even paralyzed by the enormity of it but if you can influence one person's understanding of what they're capable of, one person's understanding of how much people care about them, one person's understanding of how powerful an agent for change they can be in this world, we've changed the whole thing. And if we can understand leadership like that, if we can redefine leadership like that, we can change everything.

It's a simple idea, but I don't think it's a small one, it reflects very authentically the example that Jesus himself gave us of leadership 'You must wash one another's feet' and the invitation of Catherine to one of her young leaders 'Show kind affection every day'.

So as you take up your leadership, as you become a dealer in hope, remember the WHO, the HOW, the WHAT. **Who** are you from the inside out; **How** well do you empathize with others and how present you are to them and their needs; **What** do you do to make our world a better place. Remember the stories: Tikkun olam; the Preston University students; the lollipop moment - stories that reflect in some way the story of Jesus and the story of Catherine.



I finish with a prayer for you as Leaders, which was composed by John O'Donohue, an Irish writer

*May you have the grace and wisdom*

*To act kindly, learning*

*To distinguish between what is*

*Personal and what is not.*

*May you be hospitable to criticism.*

*May you never put yourself at the center of things.*

*May you act not from arrogance but out of service.*

*May you work on yourself,*

*Building up and refining the ways of your mind.*

*May those whom you encounter in your daily life know*

*You see and respect them.*

*May you learn to cultivate the art of presence*

*In order to engage with those who meet you.*

*May you know the wisdom of deep listening,*

*The healing of wholesome words,*

*The encouragement of the appreciative gaze,*

*May you have good friends*

*To mirror your blind spots.*

*May leadership be for you*

*A true adventure of growth.*

Thank you