BETWEEN BUREAUCRACY, SUPERVISION AND ORIGINALITY

The Power of Personal Narrative

GEOFF NUTTING

WITH THE SUBMISSION of a doctoral thesis in ministry studies freshly behind me, I felt it suitable light relief, last February, to offer at an MCD research seminar the following reflections on my experience both of bureaucracy and of supervision. This experience is not limited to the mere six years that is the ordinary ration of time for that degree-enrolment (by design, a part-time commitment). Rather, it stretches back over more than half a century. What I reported on may conveniently be divided into these three phases:

- Act I: late 1950s, towards an MA degree in musicology
- Act 2: late 1980s, towards a research degree in Religious Studies—a project never consummated despite diverse enrolments
- Act 3: twenty-first century: towards a doctorate in Ministry studies

Regrettably, time constraints meant that my comment on the most recent phase had to be minimal. My presentation, I said, might best be regarded not as a finished product but as a foretaste of a research paper–in–progress—one of which the abstract has by now been accepted for the MCD's centenary conference in July. Such a paper, I ventured, might be entitled *On the Ministry of Academic Bureaucracy and Supervision*; and in it I would claim that, ideally, such supervision is of the whole person, not just of a project.

The forthcoming paper is one of innumerable possible outflows of my thesis research, and it will be helpful if I begin by relating it broadly to the doctoral thesis. Degrees in Ministry Studies are atypical, in that reporting on personal experience in the thesis is not merely allowable—it is positively encouraged. My own case stretches this permissiveness to the limit, in that the four central chapters are, quite explicitly, diverse narratives of my personal journey through life; and most other chapters are significantly biographical (or, as academia prefers me to say, 'autoethnographic'). Our MCD ethics committee, in giving its permission for my project to proceed, did express concern some readers of this journal may perhaps share, as to the validity of autobiography as academic research.

Though I deprecate the widespread obsession with methodology, I have I trust sufficiently allayed that concern in the chapter of my thesis which, as it happens, I most enjoyed writing, the one entitled Methodology. If I have a continuing ethical concern, one that applies equally in this article, it is the ordinary human one to remain respectful of the confidentiality of others. For the 1980s segment of what I discuss today, persons and places will mostly be un-named unless by pseudonym; and I ask readers kindly to refrain even from privately guessing who might be who.

The Enneagram

One further preliminary explanation. My the-

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sis seeks to test the validity of the somewhat controversial personality theory known as the Enneagram. My method is to examine what light it may shed on a whole life history: of seventy-three years to date! Commonly, this theory is presented as an analysis of nine styles of *pathology* in individuals, and how they may be transcended. The distinctive postulate of my thesis is that what we are as personalities is precisely our *relationships*; and my concern is with the fruitfulness or otherwise for original research of relationships between enrolled student, bureaucracy and supervisor.

Bureaucracy

A quick look, first, at bureaucracy in Enneagram perspective. What we find was put in a nutshell in a throwaway remark by Russ Hudson, the foremost younger Enneagram expert, at a 2007 professional training workshop I attended in Coolangatta. Universities, he said, 'are very Six-ish institutions'. As handsome evidence of the truth of Hudson's assertion, I produced a visual aid: a 2004 guide (of Polish provenance) to a university's MA programme in European studies. Running to some thirty-seven pages, it was truly exemplary. What is meant by `Sixi-ish' is that, below the Universities' belt of pure truth seeking the following issues can loom large:

- Pecking order
- Authority of bosses at different levels, and of rival power-groups
- Pressures to conform to group thinking
- Concern for detailed rulebooks, such that it can be said 'you will always be correct if you do so-and-so'.
- And behind it all, a love-hate relationship to deviance

A mild illustration from times long past is furnished by the fate of my MA thesis in musicology. Completed in nine months flat, it bears the submission date February 1960. The date of award on my Master's degree certificate, however, is 7 July 1961. Bureaucracy at Durham in those days was, as I remember it, minimal by today's standards. I doubt they had then any worries about potential litigation or the withdrawal of government funding. But their rulebook decreed something that had been overlooked: namely, that before formal acceptance of a thesis, the final *title* had to have been registered with them for a minimum of twelve months. My beloved supervisor, Arthur Hutchings, Professor of Music, was famous as a law unto himself, accustomed to get his way, and endlessly my advocate. But to my knowledge not even he bothered to challenge this law of the Medes and Persians.

Geoff is a mental health researcher, and Special Lay Minister in his Anglican parish of Castlemaine, VIC..

Supervision

In the writing of that MA thesis, the supervisory relationship was virtually the only external influence; and by bureaucratic standards even this might appear to have been reprehensibly minimal. Arthur Hutchings, at Durham, and I working in London libraries, were about 400 kilometers apart. There was no email, and unless they were rich nobody then used the phone over such distances. Once, early in the piece, I wrote seeking Arthur's advice as to whether I need read any general history of the period whose music I was studying. He responded naming a mercifully short book, which I duly read. Once, later, I made the big journey to visit him, with a short sample of my thesis drafting; but that seemed more like a friendly social visit than a critical poring over my original work.

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Those two contacts with my supervisor, one face-to-face, were as far as I can recall the only ones. Most certainly he never saw from me anything remotely resembling a finished thesis-product until it appeared on his desk for formal assessment. Nor were there any research seminars, or peer-researchers around with whom to share one's stuff. No one vetted my English. Still, in re-reading my MA thesis (perhaps for the first time in forty years) for the purpose of that MCD seminar, I was struck by just how much I had achieved, virtually single-handed, in how little time. I could pick holes in it, indeed a few things make me shudder: like how often I used the 'royal we' instead of 'I', or the plague of exclamation marks. Still, back in 1959 the bluntest and most rigorous of my former lecturers, who had assessed it, told me that, as MA theses went, it was one of the best.

Originality

This is to claim no particular virtue for myself as an individual. Rather, it is to instance the fruitfulness of right relationship. What we are as personalities is precisely our relationships. Second only to my relationship with my parents, my relationship with Hutchings was decisively shaping for me from the moment he had offered me a place as an undergraduate; and at that distance of nearly 400 kilometres he was, by his very being, closer to me than any other of my lecturers could have been if sitting beside me. *He was in me*, and *I in him*. From my first encounter at age eighteen he had shown towards me what Simone Weil has declared to be 'the supernatural virtue of justice'. 'This justifying virtue', she wrote, 'consists of behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship. Exactly, in every respect, including the slightest details of accent and attitude…'

Many anecdotes could, at this distance in time and space, safely be told reflecting how, in his typical blunt economy of words, Hutchings had become my mentor, and what in Enneagram lore is termed my 'totem'. One of the most memorable is of how once, as he was crossing Prebends bridge over the river Wear, Miss Scott, the prim and proper Principal of St Aidan's Society, passed him in the opposite direction. 'Drunk again, Professor Hutchings?', she greeted him. 'So am I, Miss Scott, so am I', he responded. But suffice for now to give you some hint of the potential for close relationship as laid bare in Enneagram analysis, under the categories Type 5 and Type 8.

Enneagram type 5, the style deeply ingrained in me, is natively fearful, but deals with it in a way the dead opposite of the 'Sixishness' I described above. We *Fives* seek security by distancing ourselves as much as we can from others, both spatially and emotionally, especially from crowds. We become the natural outsiders to group thinking. We pride ourselves on an 'objectivity' that can be the dead opposite of what most people think. Stuck in our head most of the time, we can't help but become 'original'; but this will be fruitless unless others are prepared to honour it.

Enneagram Type 8, the style exemplified by Hutchings, is in a way very similar. *Eights* will do what they choose to do regardless of public opinion, just as Fives will think what they think and couldn't care tuppence if no one agrees with them. Both despise hypocrisy and false pretensions. For such unyielding individualism, they can respect each other as being both, in their way, 'strong'. But Eights have made a priority from early days of being on top of things, in control of their life. Whereas Fives, in everything except their intellectual specialties, tend to lack assertiveness; and also to be obsessive in distracting themselves, endlessly putting off the job that needs to be done. Experience has confirmed for me what Enneagram theory would predict: that *Eights* can be the most natural and effectual allies of Fives, generous patrons and advocates.

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Finding a Supervisor

Over forty years ago, in his bestseller *The Road Less Travelled*, psychiatrist Scott Peck gave this counsel which I cite from memory: 'Don't just passively accept the services of the first professional would-be therapist you find; if the relationship doesn't feel right, just pay their fee and look for another'. More pointedly, Peck added (and here I cite him verbatim from my ancient file of handy quotes):

> If it is relevant to you, don't hold back from asking what the therapist's feelings are about such issues as women's liberation or homosexuality or religion. You are entitled to honest, open and careful answers.

I would like to think that any supervisor approved by MCD would be unruffled by such questions, and prompt to give honest, open and careful answers. But experience elsewhere in academia, not to mention the Enneagram, has taught me to see such candour as a gracious privilege rather than an automatic entitlement, human nature being what it is. For a cautionary tale, I'm coming now to Act 2 of this paper, set in the 1980s: 'Towards Mastery in Religious Studies'. But this will need some backgrounding.

Sick of Syllogism

In late 1983 I became, at least for a long season, a somewhat changed person. In the wake of a second turning point in a mystical development fostered by time I spent regularly as Guest of Cistercian monks, I became sick to death of my old addiction to tight logical analysis. For the first time, a variety of Christian mystical texts became overnight an open book to me; and within a month or two I was moved to offer, as it were, new wine—a paper on Julian of Norwich—to ANZAMRS, an Australasian learned association for Medieval and Renaissance Studies. For such a new undertaking I had received no academic training whatsoever; but my offer was taken up, probably because in musicology I had presented three previous papers at ANZAMRS conferences, two of which were subsequently published in their journal.

Whatever the limitations of this premature brain-child (or rather heart-child) of mine, my first Julian paper, six months later I was competently assured that I had got it right, understood Julian aright. This was in Norwich, UK, where I was attending an international conference on mystical perception. The assurance came from the two conference organizers: a French medical professor, and RitaMary, an American Catholic Religious. Each held a PhD in Julian. RitaMary, who was then editor of a journal on mysticism, warmly urged me to pursue Julian research under appropriate supervision, and to keep in touch. Back in Australia the first bit, about appropriate supervision, proved easier said than done.

Act 2, Scene 1

One of Australia's 'ancient' universities. Their English department sported a lecturer who declared willing. He had done Julian research under the learned American editor—a Catholic Religious—of the definitive scholarly edition of Julian in translation. What need to look further? I enrolled. But 'John', it turned out, though a Catholic academic, professed no competence in Julian's theology, let alone her mysticism: his expertise, he protested, was solely textual. With him, a 'Sixish' person, security-minded, wary of his boss—and perhaps of me—I felt no resonance.

Nor was I encouraged by what I found when, in his English department, I attended a young woman's postgraduate seminar paper on the distinguished Australian Catholic poet James McCauley. My own experientially based comments on that paper were, I found, warmly received by women present; indeed one of them most excitedly continued the discussion with me to the end of my homeward tram journey. However, a male present at that seminar had blurted out these words: 'The Professor

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wouldn't allow you to write that in your thesis'; and with one accord all the male postgraduates had said `Amen'. It was not that McCauley was *infra dig* with the Professor; but in a thesis you were supposed to write from the head, not the heart. For me, no further evidence was needed, to decide I had no wish to paddle my canoe in such a forbidding God-professor's kingdom.

Act 2, scene 2.

Perhaps, I thought, a Department of Religious Studies would be more concerned with personal meaning. Rather belatedly, such departments had started to sprout in Australian universities, including two in the state where I lived at the time. At one of these I tried my luck. Promptly its Acting Head advised me that in our State there was only room for one such department to thrive, and that was his own. But that was OK. 'I would be happy', he said, 'to supervise you personally for an MA thesis on Julian, and you could treat the topic however you wished'. Perhaps I should have smelt a rat, but I sensed no problem until bureaucratic issues arose, successively in two forms that cost me much effort to no effect.

First, we were urged to apply for research funding. Such an invitation at MCD is very simple with clear boundaries and great goodwill; but there, a quarter century ago, boundaries were unclear. I sought subsidy to spend research-time resident in a variety of contemplative communities. My supervisor couldn't see the point of that, but asked for a formal written justification. This I provided, with attached letter from Sr RitaMary in which she strongly affirmed that what I proposed was exactly what was most needed. That got nowhere.

The second bureaucratic request was that we write a detailed thesis outline and justification of topic, with an indicative title. Unlike a comparable requirement at MCD for a doctorate in ministry studies, this too came with no clear boundaries. Under my chosen title, 'The Christian Psychotherapy of Julian of Norwich', I complied in extraordinarily careful detail, critical of secular pretensions to the healing of the psyche. My supervisor, without decisively refusing the project, made plain his worries that that title would run into strife with the large and powerful psychology department of the university, which apparently might claim for their own discipline copyright on the word 'therapy'. And anyway, he himself didn't feel it was the right word. Probably this man was not himself what is called an *Enneagram Six*; but Six-ish issues ran deep in him.

Hoping a change of supervisor might resolve problems, I was once impertinent enough to suggest to him that his Evangelical background made it hard for our minds to mesh fruitfully around Julian's meanings. Though clearly he was uncomfortable with what he regarded as being labelled, and sought to deflect it, I was formally transferred to a Catholic colleague. But the latter's special research interests could hardly have been more remote from Julian studies.

If I benefited from that 1980s enrolment, it was mainly from the stimulation of involvement in a postgraduate research seminar which routinely allotted a whole evening to a single presentation, and to which I myself contributed two. I had, beyond that, something to show for it: two journal publications on Julian, and a solicited review, heartily approved by RitaMary, of a trendy new translation of the *Revelations*. But a completed thesis was not among the fruits. I formally withdrew, stating in part (in the final report required of me) that appropriate supervision had proved to be unavailable.

To my supervisor, who had to read this report with me before passing it on to higher echelons of the bureaucracy, this assertion was clearly a body blow. Sensing he risked exploding before my eyes, I offered to re-word it less bluntly. To his credit he declined this offer, saying it had to be *my* report, how I saw the situation. But he added that my topic had been right on the margin of his own competence to

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supervise—he had had in his first degree just one unit in psychology; and he had only taken me on as a kindness to me, knowing there was nowhere else I could have been enrolled.

Act 2, scene 3

To these, his last words, I had two parting ironies to share at the MCD seminar. First, that I gained very prompt enrolment at that other place which did Religious Studies, the one he had implied could not thrive—and that with a supervisor of exceptional standing in the Australian community of learning. Soon this mentor was to retire and bequeath me to another, but not before spurring me, by his own quick judgment of what was fresh and new in my work, to embark on Enneagram studies. That was just three pages in a seminar-paper where I suggested that Plotinus could be interpreted as an *Enneagram Five*, and Julian as a *Four*.

The second irony is now nearer home. Before that, I had also met a truly wonderful potential supervisor, a Contemplative who had published on Julian, and worked under the umbrella of MCD. Gladly would he have taken me on; but he suspected a bureaucratic problem. And sure enough, it turned out that, while under twenty-first century MCD regulations he could have done so, at that time he could not, because I lacked what was then a prerequisite, namely a first degree in divinity. I had to my theological credit only a diploma from Oxford.

How I hate bureaucracy! For an Enneagram Five, it can be a pain in the gut, and risks unmanning us. For folk of my Type it is an enormous relief—a *Five*-friend half my age doing a theological PhD at La Trobe tells me the same—to have a supervisor who will deal with it for us, painlessly. I am most grateful to have had that privilege over the last four years with MCD, through a supervisor, moreover, whom it was a delight to be with, as indeed I anticipated from the first moment of our meeting. What we are as personalities is precisely our relationships; and my wife attests that in my time of my special community with my MCD supervisor I have grown in humanity. What he has meant for me as person will be always with me.

Compatibility of the Personality Types

Each personality type thinks differently, has different values and approaches, and wants different things in a relationship. Some types have more elements in common with each other (for example, two Positive Outlook types or two Withdrawn types); however, with the lens of the Riso-Hudson Enneagram, the strengths and trouble spots can be specified for each combination of the nine personality types.

What are your relationship

** Values? * Expectations? * Decision and Thinking Patterns? * Argument Styles? * Ways of Resolving Conflicts? * Fears and Cover-ups? * Communication Styles? * Defenses? * Coping Mechanisms?*

There are concrete answers to these compatibility questions. However, you need to know your own type (as well as the other person's) accurately before you can fully benefit from this incredibly valuable resource.

—From the Enneagram Institute website.

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