

Learning to Navigate in Missional Waters

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Abstract

What do we do when our maps stop working? How do we locate ourselves, and then find the way forward? Eddie Gibbs offers us the clue: when maps stop working, we train navigators. Navigation is both an old skill and an ancient metaphor. The Greek word means pilot, helmsman, or guide, and was used to speak of spiritual direction. When a ship is entering a harbor universal knowledge is no longer adequate, local knowledge becomes critical. We begin practicing the skills of kubernetes, skills that represent a response to adaptive challenges. Some of these practices are:

- *create a context where problems invoke possibilities*
- *find or create rituals that invoke memory (an internal location)*
- *initiate and convene conversations that shift peoples experience – help people ask new questions and then like a poet give them new language*
- *value and affirm process, get comfortable with mystery*
- *value experimentation and risk, cultivate generosity*
- *listen and pay attention*



In the spring of 1980 I was looking for a job. I crossed paths with a college friend who had just secured a summer job as a fishing guide. He planned to head up to Stuart Island in May to start training, and I decided to head up to Stuart Island with him.

My first day training was eye opening. I thought the ocean was a large, predictable body of water: I found myself being ferried around in a small boat in tidal waters between islands. Imagine a river that flows north one day at 4 knots. The next morning you return to the same place and it's flowing south at 6 knots. Hugh whirlpools spun off rocks, sometimes reaching two hundred feet across and fifty feet in depth. Change was constant. The "terrain" of the ocean and its currents was

unpredictable because of the islands, underwater obstacles, and the weather. While the phases of the moon offered us a guideline in terms of the time of maximum flow even that varied by a few knots depending on where you were.

I could tell many stories from my eight seasons as a fishing guide, but what I want to do instead is make the connection to missional leadership.

We live in a time where the landscape has become fluid. What was once predictable and stable is now like the rapids I faced while fishing. One day 4 knots south, the next day 6 knots north. The settled and predictable ways of Modernity and Christendom have given way to plurality, fragmentation, and mystery. Maps have given way to navigation.

Maps are amazing tools. They allow us to locate ourselves in relation to the landscape, using features and indicators that rarely change. In Modernity we used internal maps to orient to the culture and to find our way forward. Moreover, when we made mistakes we could reference our maps to locate ourselves, step back and start again.

That was then — this is now.

“Truth is stranger than it used to be.” Objectivity? Who has such a thing? And if we can locate “objective” truth, a God’s eye view, who has the authority to proclaim it? We’ve lost trust in our leaders, often for good reason. We emphasized charisma over character, and now many public leaders have their own good in view, and not the greater good.

Turbulence has become the norm. The pace of change outstrips our ability to adjust. Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, Google Earth – these things didn’t exist ten years ago. We have incredible tools, but technology sometimes offers an illusion of intimacy over real community. Many of us live with a deeper sense of isolation and fragmentation than ever. No wonder “community” has become a buzzword, or “an aerosol word” – it offers a hint of mist and sweetness, but without substance. More than ever we are looking for places and a people to whom we can belong.

Moreover, what we assumed were stable and enduring features of our culture have either disappeared or morphed so much that we no longer recognize them. And because change is not evenly distributed, context is king – adaptive responses must be local.

What do we do when maps no longer describe the territory? How do we locate ourselves, and then find the way forward? Eddie Gibbs offered us the clue: when maps stop working, we train navigators.

The Competencies of Navigation

“The Church needs navigators tuned to the voice of God, not map-readers. Navigational skills have to be learned on the high seas and in the midst of varying conditions produced by the wind, waves, currents, fogbanks, darkness, storm clouds and perilous rocks.”¹

¹ Eddie Gibbs, *Leadership Next* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2005) 66.

It wasn't so long ago I was sitting in a board meeting reviewing a five-year plan. The marker points were fixed. We assumed a stable rate of growth. We estimated our finances would follow the same trend forward as they had for five years past. But someone moved the markers and in year three the landscape looked completely different.

Navigation is a significantly different skill than map-reading. The points on a map are fixed, and locating a point in the real world simply requires locating oneself by correspondence to known geography or artifacts, and then proceeding methodically to the next point. If you have a compass and a bit of logic, this is really, really easy.

But when the markers are missing, navigation requires no fixed planetary points. Instead, one learns to read the sky – the stars, really – and orients by a point *outside* the world. This requires a sense of 3D space, and the ability to apply to move *without* logic. Instead, an *imaginative framework* is applied to the real world.

Map reading requires only logic and a table top: any ten year old can master it with paper and a compass. Navigation, on the other hand, is a skill acquired in fluid conditions. It requires courage and the ability to withstand harsh conditions. And it requires something that is never required of map readers: faith and a fundamental inner peace. When there are no physical points to locate ourselves, we rely on an internal compass. That internal compass is tuned not to earthly artifacts but to an external reference point – the North Star.

We don't really need navigators in times of cultural stability. We need them desperately in seasons of transition. And as we might expect, we have great stories of navigators in the Old Testament. There were no maps for the people of Israel leaving Egypt, only a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night.

From Captivity to Freedom

Israel had been in captivity for four hundred years – enough time to learn some bad habits. But the root issue was personal: which God would they worship? Egyptian religion was man-made, offering predictable gods who could be manipulated. Religion puts us in control. We develop religious technologies and promote religious experts so that we can actually avoid the encounter with a living God.

The God of the Exodus, on the other hand, was untamed and demanded complete loyalty. He didn't offer Israel a game plan for the coming miles or the next forty years. Instead, he offered them his presence and Promise – to go before them.

Why not simply give them a map? There are at least two reasons.

First, *God himself* wanted to be the way forward. He wanted a people radically dependent on His Spirit.

Second, the *process* was as important as the destination. God wasn't just providing deliverance. He wasn't a substitute for a standing army. He's the king! He is forming a people for himself, a people that mirror his own heart. Eric Hoffer gives us a hint toward the difference.

“Moses wanted to turn a tribe of enslaved Hebrews into free men. You would think that all he had to do was to gather the slaves and tell them that they were free. But Moses knew better. He knew that the transformation of slaves into free men was more difficult and painful than the transformation of free men into slaves...”²

Map-readers and navigators are actually two different kinds of people. While it is possible to make map readers into navigators, it is not easy, and many never make the transition. Map readers as leaders make good managers; navigators as leaders are explorers. Map readers love stability; navigators enjoy the wilderness. Map readers are impatient with process; navigators embrace the journey. Map-reading is a lonely vocation; navigators value company.

Navigation is both an old skill and an ancient metaphor. John Climacus uses the Greek word *kubernetes* in the early seventh century *Ladder of Divine Ascent*. The word means *pilot, helmsman, or guide*, and he used it to speak of spiritual direction. When a ship is entering a harbor universal knowledge is no longer adequate, local knowledge becomes critical. The pilot comes alongside the captain and crew to guide them safely through unfamiliar waters, past hidden obstacles. Travelling in a straight line in unknown waters can get you killed.

Travelling off the Map

When Moses led God’s people out of Egypt it would be easy to imagine he was leading a journey from Point A to Point B. That simply was not the case. Moses was not really leading people at all; he was following the Lord, and leading a *process* where God could form a ragtag mob into a people of the Spirit.

When we helped to plant Metro, a church in the urban core of Kelowna, the mother church was entering a crisis. The Metro community and ministry were growing rapidly. With more than 50% of our community homeless or in addiction, the needs were endless. How would we hire staff? We sought individual donors who saw the vision, and began building bridges of collaboration to other agencies. New partnerships would provide stable funding. In its operation today Metro is a hybrid: it looks like an agency from the outside, but like a faith community from the inside. Metro is a novelty within the denomination, but may be the future.

Navigators don’t have maps, but they do have tools. Navigators use the sextant. We can work with tools and frameworks that help us “read” the ocean or read the sky. We can embrace ancient practices that allow us to live and “read” more deeply – the context and culture, rhythms of solitude and community, gathering and dispersion, prayer and work.

How do we begin to cultivate navigators? By practicing the skills of *kubernetes*, skills that represent a response to adaptive challenges. Some of these practices are:

- create a context where problems invoke possibilities

² Eric Hoffer, *Working and Thinking on the Waterfront*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) 179.

- find or create rituals that invoke memory (an internal location)
- initiate and convene conversations that shift peoples experience – help people ask new questions and then like a poet give them new language
- value and affirm process, get comfortable with mystery
- value experimentation and risk, cultivate generosity
- listen and pay attention

Navigators look for possibilities. The problem of funding at Metro required a new imagination about partnerships. A different vision of belonging has required new language around community, especially the way we divide the world into *us and them*. Our community is not providing services, we are inviting everyone into a new kind of family.

On a Sunday one summer I asked a friend to read from Isaiah at a mid point in my teaching. Tim was not a gifted reader; he had never finished high school. He struggled through the passage, but all could see the joy in his face. In *Living Gently in a Violent World*, Stan Hauerwas relates a similar story. He notes that we often exclude people not because they lack gifting, but because “the dominant form violence takes in modernity is speed.” He writes about Gary, who was mentally disabled. “Gary also read Scripture [in the gatherings]. It would take a long time. But for the church to learn to wait for the lesser member to speak is to witness to the world a different way of living.”³ The “problem” of an unskilled reader is the possibility that we can learn a new way of living together, a new opportunity for inclusion in a new kind of family.

Navigators invoke memory. Memory is corporate, the stories of a people on a journey in a particular time and place. Memory is also historical and collective, spanning generations and including the stories of Israel. Listening and dialogue and systems like appreciate inquiry invite the memory that roots us in something larger and transcendent. Particular rituals anchor and evoke these rooting memories.

Navigators invoke memory by telling the story. Stories create and maintain the culture.⁴ In many congregations, the narrators are too few, and are often those most distant from living the daily adventure. At Metro everyone tells the story. From the beginning of the community we have structured a sharing time each week via an open mike. This informal sharing time often dominates our gathering. We hear stories of victory, of pain, of hope, of longing – and this de-centered form of preaching centers and gathers our community around the activity of God in our midst, often hidden just below the surface of our lives, but like leaven so powerful.

Navigators take risks. Yet, “Organizations, like living beings, are hardwired to optimize what they know and not to throw success away.”⁵ The advantage of a new community in a new location among

³ Jean Vanier, Stanley Hauerwas, *Living Gently in a Violent World* (Downer’s Grove: IVP, 2008) 45.

⁴ See the helpful insights of Gary Nelson here, found in *Borderland Churches* (Chalice Press, 2008) 101ff.

⁵ Kevin Kelly, “New Rules for the New Economy.” *Wired* (September, 1997) 192-194.

street people and addicts is that we are *defacto* outside our comfort zones. We are forced to become learners together.

At Metro we took risks in numerous ways. First, we risked meeting in a dance venue in the downtown core. Second, we risked by hiring staff who had little specialized training, but obvious passion. Third, we risked by welcoming a few needy or at risk people into our homes. The cost of that kind of hospitality is the censure of the established social agencies. A few of us still have bad reputations (“You have no boundaries!”) as a result. Finally, we risked by including recovering addicts in our decision making processes; they understand the needs and potential uniquely.

Navigators convene conversations. How do we cultivate missional partnerships when values differ?⁶ Metro has been invited to an inter-agency table, but our vision of human flourishing and the path to achieve it is radically different from most agencies. We are impatient with these conversations: we want to get on with the work.

While it takes time and effort to listen and develop trust, partnerships both broaden our base and strengthen our learning. Sally Morgenthaler writes that, “Groups that are too much alike find it harder to keep learning because each member is bringing less and less to the table.”⁷ Para-doxically, the more unlike we are the more we can learn together. We have taken time to convene conversations with the mayor, with civic leaders, and with other agencies because we believe the wider community can benefit by our collaboration. We have seen the beginnings of dividends in slowly building trust as the agenda of homelessness and the hope of finding answers together take root. We believe mission is as much about community transformation as about individuals.

Navigators offer new language to their partners. In *The Sky is Falling* Alan Roxburgh describes the poetic leader as one who helps us make sense of our experience. The word in the prologue of John tells how Jesus “became flesh and lived among us.” In a similar way, the poet shapes words so that what was hidden and invisible becomes known. Poets remove the veil and give language to what people are experiencing. This is only possible when the poet herself lives within the traditions and narratives of the people - “living reflexively in the traditions...The poet listens to the rhythms and meanings occurring beneath the surface.”⁸ Perry Keefe writes that,

Old words do not reach across the new gulfs,
and it is only in vision and oracle that we can chart the unknown
and new-name the creatures.⁹

⁶ See in particular the work of Peter Block, *Community: The Structure of Belonging* (San Francisco: Barret-Koehler Publishers, 2008)

⁷ Sally Morgenthaler, “Leadership in a Flattened World.” In *An Emergent Manifesto of Hope*. Doug Pagitt and Tony Jones, Eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2007) 183.

⁸ Alan Roxburgh, *The Sky is Falling* (Eagle, ID: ACI Publications, 2005) 164.

⁹ Perry Keefe. “Theopoetics: Process and Perspective.” *Christianity and Literature* 58,4, (Summer, 2009) 579–601.

A friend of mine is active in the environmental movement in Oregon. When he moved into the area he looked for people in his neighborhood who were already active in community issues. Some of them were stunned to learn that Christians care about the environment and about the quality of life in the neighborhood. He had this great opportunity to make the connection for them, so he said to them: "I care because God cares. And when you care, you are doing the work of the kingdom."

Dan was naming God and God's rule for them. He was peeling back the veneer and saying, "This is GOD's world. God is on a mission to transform the world, even among you here today, whether you know it or not."

Navigators value mystery. Our answer to many questions must become, "We don't know." We aren't in control of this journey or its end. There is always another surprise around the corner. But we know who builds His kingdom and who will bring it to perfection.

One of the surprises is that God goes ahead of us on mission (Luke 10 – the disciples prepare the way for Jesus, a role now occupied by the Holy Spirit). We expect a way to appear where none is evident, and we expect to find persons of peace.

One winter my wife was driving when she saw a woman walking along the street who we knew through Metro. Liz was an active cocaine addict, so also a prostitute to pay for her habit. It was cold so Betty stopped and picked her up, gave her some gloves, but also asked her about her experience of Jesus. It went something like this:

"Do you know Jesus?"

"Yes."

"How do you know him?"

"When I'm cold he's like a warm blanket. And when I'm hungry, he's like a warm meal."

Navigators are listening and paying attention to God. The more gifted our community, the more inclined we are to rely on our own abilities. Prayer acknowledges our dependence on God.

Prayer is all about attention, and prayer requires we slow down and listen. As Walter Brueggemann put it, "the space for imagination to expand and take shape is inversely proportional to the speed at which we live."¹⁰

When the signposts have disappeared and the maps fail us, we know one who does not change and who can read the waters and guide us. When we slow down and listen, we have the chance to be led and to engage in new ways. Plans may fail us, strategies may expire, but when we partner with God as his purpose unfolds we become Navigators.

God is active in our neighbourhoods and cities, bringing His kingdom. Learning to listen as new possibilities unfold, we can fix our gaze on the North Star, raise our sails in the wind and learn the ways of the Navigator.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Hopeful Imagination* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1986) 56-57.

The Prayer of St. Brendan, the Navigator

Shall I abandon, O King of mysteries, the soft comforts of home?

*Shall I turn my back on my native land, and turn my face towards the sea?
Shall I put myself wholly at your mercy, without silver, without a horse,
without fame, without honor?*

*Shall I throw myself wholly upon you, without sword and shield,
without food and drink, without a bed to lie on?
Shall I say farewell to my beautiful land,
placing myself under Your yoke?*

*O King of the Glorious Heaven,
shall I go of my own choice upon the sea?*

O Christ, will You help on the wild waves?