

## WHERE WOULD I BE WITHOUT THE LATIHAN?

When my wife moved out with our two small children, I was devastated. It was as if my insides were bleeding. And, as if all this was not enough for me to cope with, it so happened that my work life presented me with a huge challenge just two weeks later. Of all the bad luck for me, my school was one of the very few at that time to be chosen for an inspection by a team of Her Majesty's Inspectors. Nowadays inspections by Ofsted Inspectors are commonplace for all schools; in those days it was very rare for a school to be inspected like this. In fact, many teachers could go through all their teaching careers without seeing an inspector for more than part of a day. Our inspection meant a team of inspectors would be in my school for the best part of a week. I was really in no condition to stand up to the depth of scrutiny of my work that this entailed. Physically I was exhausted through lack of sleep, if nothing else; psychologically, I was "hyped up", in a state of high alertness, waiting for the next "bomb to explode" in my life. I suppose there was a little bit of a plus: such big things were going on in my life that there were times when even an inspection seemed trivial in comparison. However, there is no doubt that by the time the inspection arrived in my school, I was at a very low ebb.

The first day went by OK. The inspectors were in and out of my room, watching me teach and looking at children's work etc. but they were not there the whole time, so I had some respite and I coped alright. The second day completely caught me out. The inspectors were in and out of my room the whole time. Sometimes I had two inspectors in my room at the same time and all the while I was being asked questions while I was teaching! It was like being interviewed on the job. By the end of the day I was a nervous wreck. I could not understand why I had been given this treatment: I imagined it was because the inspectors had found something wrong with my teaching and were unhappy with what they had seen. Oh dear! That was the final straw. I decided I would not be able to take another three days of this, so I felt I had no option but to give up the attempt and instead I would go and stay with my parents, some 70 miles away, and just opt out of all that was going on for awhile. I supposed this is what was meant by a "nervous breakdown."

As I drove away from school, in something of a "shell-shocked" state, I realised it was my latihan night, so I had a choice in front of me: I could either

go straight to my folks as I had just intended or I could wait until after the latihan and maybe do some testing about it first. I felt so defeated and low that I really did not feel optimistic about testing- or, in fact, anything- helping. I had about five minutes to decide because then I would come to a crossroads where I had to turn left if I was to go to my folks' house and right if I was to stay until after the latihan. The horror of the day was still so strong that I felt like turning left and having done with it all...Soon the crossroads were in sight. How rarely does the rest of one's life hang on such a split second decision...As I slowed down, I left it until the last moment before putting on the indicators to turn...RIGHT. I would defer my decision until after I had done some testing about it later that night! When I think how close I was to leaving everything- my home, and especially my job and children- I shudder even now. How different my life might have been. Why, all that was to happen in my future- and so much of it so good- could so easily have been lost! Of course, I could not know all that then when I was simply very unhappy and at my wits end to know how to cope and what to do about it all. It had all become too hard, too much.

I went to the latihan exhausted and dazed. There was only one other man there but the latihan was its usual strong and convincing experience and this left me energised and somewhat enlivened. As yet, I had no answers as to what I should, or could, do, so I went into the testing wondering how it could possibly help with something that was too horrible and too difficult for me. Within moments my entire attitude to the inspection had changed! I tested: "What was, and should be, my attitude to this inspection? What should I guard against, and encourage in myself? How would God have me be at this time?" I could not believe it: I had completely misunderstood what was going on at school! There was nothing wrong with my teaching and- surprise! surprise!- the inspectors were basically on my side. I felt now that they were not those unfeeling, hyper-critical beings out to get me as I had been convinced they were. In fact, it was as if they wanted me to do well and were, if anything, rather sympathetic! Probably, more significant than this understanding was the complete reversal of my feelings that this testing left me with. Gone was the despair; in its place was, rather unbelievably, an overwhelming confidence, energy and determination to teach well! Surprisingly, now as I look back on this, I accepted this completely and I can only think this was because of the strength of feeling it had.

Anyway, the next day was particularly challenging for me because it was my turn to lead the assembly. I was usually a bit nervous about doing this because

the whole school community would be observing and listening to me: this time they would all be joined by a group of suited, clip-boarded inspectors sitting in the back row. However, I was still on a bit of a high after the previous night's testing and I remembered it had told me to enjoy telling my assembly story and to do it more loudly than usual and with marked variations in my voice. I did this and the assembly went beautifully. Afterwards the lead inspector came over to me and said: "I can't wait until tomorrow." I looked quizzically at him. "These assemblies get better every day!" he said. I felt twelve feet tall!

The rest of that day was much more relaxed and much easier than the previous one- and so was the rest of the inspection. Other teachers were closely scrutinised on subsequent days and I was left alone more. It turned out that part of the plan for the inspection was to give each teacher an intense day in turn. Mine had been on the Tuesday! I wish I had been told that beforehand: I would not have imagined the worst and it would have saved me a lot of distress. But then I would have missed that wonderful testing which single-handedly kept my life together. I am sure that without the latihan and testing on that memorable Tuesday evening, I would have turned left and possibly changed the whole course of my life. At the very least, I would have been seen to have had a "complete breakdown" with all that that entails. As it was I had a successful inspection which was to help my career move forward in a completely unplanned way. But that was in the future: my next big challenge was to find somewhere to live for my children and myself...But that is another latihan and testing story!