FURTHER EDUCATION
TRUST FOR LEADERSHIP

LETTING THE LIGHT IN

THE DAMAGE THAT SHAME DOES AND HOW TO REPAIR IT

BOB TOWNLEY

ABOUT FETL

The Further Education Trust for Leadership's vision is of a further education sector that is valued and respected for:

- Innovating constantly to meet the needs of learners, communities and employers;
- Preparing for the long term as well as delivering in the short term; and
- Sharing fresh ideas generously and informing practice with knowledge.

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FOREWORD

Dame Ruth Silver

This is the fourth and final report published by the Further Education Trust for Leadership (FETL) in its series on shame and repair and their impact on FE and skills. The previous reports focused on shame in organisational life, the impact on 'shamed' leaders, and the role of the regulatory system, in particular in focusing blame on institutions and individuals. This report, by Bob Townley of the University of York, completes the cycle, examining the personal and institutional costs of systemic blaming and shaming, and the process of reflection, learning and repair that can help leaders and their organisations recover and move forward.

This is a difficult topic to talk about – it implies vulnerability in leaders, which can be difficult for both leaders and staff to acknowledge, and it demands that we look unflinchingly at the impact of the systems of regulation, accountability and oversight in the FE sector, as well as at the ways in which we judge apparent failure, and the kinds of support that are available to colleagues when things do go wrong. None of this is to say that we should not call out poor leadership or mismanagement when it occurs – of course, we should. But it is just as important that we try to better understand what is going on here – the causes and impact of shame and shaming – and at least start to talk about it, which is why FETL has been so keen to engage colleagues in the discussion.

It is important too to remember that this is new ground. We are testing new ideas and approaches and I have not expected our authors to deliver the right answers or always to know for certain they are asking the right questions. You have to be prepared to be wrong, and even, sometimes, to look slightly foolish or naive, if you are to say something new and get people to think differently. FETL has been conscious that we are asking the authors of all four papers to step outside of their professional comfort zones and talk about the world in different terms.

It would be wrong, therefore, to read this report in the hope of acquiring an off-the-shelf, oven-ready solution to repair-damaged institutions, tarnished reputations, bruised colleagues or the fast-fading confidence of colleagues. Do read it, however, if you know about, or indeed grasp, the complexity of repairing from shame and the intricacy involved in the important reclamation of the knowledge that can help it to happen. Read it if you want to see a more compassionate, human-centred sector, or simply if you want to understand – what could be more human than that?

It is telling, I feel, that, in concluding his reflections, Dr Townley notes that he feels he knows more about damage than he does about repair. I suspect this is widely true, though seldom acknowledged. It helps explain why it is so important that we have this conversation. Many of us are hopelessly unprepared for the prospect of failure, real or perceived, yet dealing with it positively is a significant part of life and leadership. Recognising the need is a critical part of the process of repair and recovery, and points encouragingly to the next steps in the development of generative thinking within the sector around these issues.

I hope readers will appreciate the journey we have undertaken with Dr Townley and the other authors of these papers. For the authors, too, developing their ideas across these themes has been challenging – they could not have done it if they had not been prepared to make themselves vulnerable. I appreciate their efforts very much, and I hope that readers will explore this material and other sources too – thinking and learning widely and fearlessly – to make the next step in that journey.

This report is offered in the spirit of supporting this thinking as we mobilise the will to undertake the work.

Dame Ruth Silver is President of the Further Education Trust for Leadership

INTRODUCTION

Ring the bell which still can ring. Forget your perfect offering. There is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in.

(Leonard Cohen, The Future, 1992)

This report is about repair. It draws upon a range of practical and contemporary lessons of leadership, where a generative space has been created to prepare for, cope with, reflect on, learn from and repair the personal and institutional costs of systemic blaming and shaming. Hopefully it will help to illustrate what can be learned from a new approach to leadership – recently termed 'leaderhood' by Dame Ruth – inspired by thoughtful and creative leaders outside and within FE.

It attempts to build upon the important work led by FETL over the past year, exploring the causes and costs of shame within the FE sector and thinking about the conditions required to support recovery and repair. At the time of writing we are working, living and leading in very strange times, with unsettled days and an uncertain future. As Dame Ruth recently remarked, the sector is currently 'pivoting'; it has been dismantled, and will need to be gradually reassembled in the wake of this multi-faceted crisis. Leadership – or more precisely '*leaderhood*' – has never been more needed to guide organisations purposefully and reflexively through these times, with a keen eye on the 'good' and the potential for a healthy and creative – generative – recovery.

As the range of FETL publications over the past five years clearly show, the FE sector, its institutions, people and leaders have

been inundated by 'wave after wave of policy change, propelled, all too often, by a fear of failure and an anxiety about what policy tsunami might surge our way next'.[1] This has resulted in a sector shaken by uncertainty and changes in procedure, leading to a lack of trust in the system. The latest government response to the UK 'Skills Crisis' – the same crisis that has been spoken and written about for over 30 years, ever since I started to study these issues, (e.g. Finegold and Soskice, 1988)[2] – is to 'build back better'. This speaks of repairing the damage, which Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, recently described as 'fixing the leaky ceilings' of a structure which is not working[3] and – through the 2019 Augar Review[4] – 'to undo some of the reputational and financial damage caused to FE institutions in recent years' (EDSK, 2020),[5] particularly so that the sector is 'respected and stable'. There is something in this language which evokes the image of a crumbling building, which needs to be repaired and restored and from which the inhabitants must be rescued. On the other hand, and unlike any other part of the UK education system, it is the FE sector that *builds* the skills that can perform all aspects of this repair operation with care and precision.

What is particular to this situation is the apportioning of blame (experienced in many cases as shame) to those responsible for leading, delivering and learning within this sector. This is reminiscent of the blaming and shaming of Liverpool football fans after the Hillsborough stadium disaster in 1989 and their resilience through a 30-year battle to restore their good name and collective sense of self. Can it be coincidence that this football club went on to win the Premier League title – for the first time since Hillsborough – in the same year, 30 years on from its loyal supporters (mothers, fathers, sons and daughters) being described, collectively, as 'scum'? The pain for the club's leader in this case, who attended every funeral, was visceral, leaving him unable to cope and needing to retreat from the scene.

In recognising the human costs involved, the FETL shame project is a response to the tragic loss of a respected sector colleague for whom the shaming had become unbearable.

Like some of the other researchers on the project my proximity to these issues also brought my own feelings into sharp relief. It is from this perspective that I bring my reflections on damage and repair, also informed by own educational 'second chance' through a former south London FE college (now a bus garage outside Brixton). At a policy level this perspective has been informed by many years working in a research capacity within the post-16 Learning and Skills environment, which brought me into productive and creative contact with many leaders, managers and staff in FE colleges, sixth forms and learning providers across England and Wales. In writing this paper I am reaching out and shaking hands with these colleagues, particularly those currently existing somewhere between a sense of damage and repair.

1 Dame Ruth Silver, *Times Educational Supplement*, December 2019.
2 Finegold, D., and Soskice, D. 1988. The failure of training in Britain: Analysis and prescription. *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*. 4(3) 3, pp. 21–53.
3 Further Education speech, Exeter College, 29 September 2020.
4 Independent panel report to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding Presented to Parliament by the Secretary of State for Education (May 2019). https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/805127/Review_of_post_18_education_and_funding.pdf
5 FETL(Further Education Trust for Leadership)/EDSK. 2020. *Further consideration, Creating and new role, purpose and direction for the FE Sector*. FETL.

THE DAMAGE THAT SHAME DOES

As in much of FETL's work I draw on theories from psychoanalysis and my own findings and insights from a doctoral study into the emotional implications of loss, mourning and repair for those leading and working in organisations.

Psychoanalytic thinking provides us with a body of knowledge, research and wisdom through which to explore our complex inner selves. As already shown in the previous works in this series, it provides particular insights into the internal workings of shame and why this emotion is so damaging to those who experience it. Moreover, shame spreads and contaminates a system, so – as described so powerfully by Dame Ruth – in the case of the FE sector the leaders carry the burden and the learners 'wear the livery' of shame. Shame therefore becomes woven into the fabric of the system; it blocks out the light of hope.

The sectoral and institutional damage of shame

As Susan Harrison and John Bazalgette note in their recent report (May 2020)[6] – the first of this series – in order to fully understand the personal experience of shame we need to be mindful of the organisational dynamics that locate the individual within the wider sectoral and organisational system. It is about acknowledging the multi-level process through which shame becomes so damaging for all within that system and how leaders become the repository of a complex array of

6 FETL. 2020. *FE and Skills and shame in organisational life*. FETL.

emotions and projections, including guilt, anger, resentment and blame. As the authors stress:

> *Where a leader in further education is consumed by shame, therefore, that dynamic is likely to reflect the wider psycho–social reality of the FE sector…*

The second report in this series (June 2020) describes the experience of leaders and organisations operating within an 'unfair' system, designed to re-direct the focus of blame. As in attacks on organisational whistle-blowers (Stein, 2019),[7] we can view the unwanted parts – the weaknesses, vulnerability and failings – being projected, *as blame*, by those responsible for the system on to institutions and leaders within that system. It is within these systemic dynamics that 'good' and 'bad' are subtly interchanged. And it is the reality of over-scrutiny and persecution described above that makes the sector particularly vulnerable to experiences of shaming. As highlighted in this recent FETL report, the leaders interviewed felt that the system 'was designed to personalise and publicise shame, focusing blame on individuals and away from system-wide problems', thereby 'passing the buck' or projecting the accountability for these problems in a deeply personal way and – through this insight – suggest that colleges and their regulators pause for thought and repair. In terms of the metaphor of the crumbling, leaky, building, we might think of a structure (and system) damaged by the rising damp of shame.

Damaging the team

Isabel Menzies Lyth's 1960 study, 'A case-study in the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety',[8] which inspired and informed later work in relation to group relations, showed how nurses in the NHS had sought to protect themselves, unconsciously, from the swirling fog of anxiety surrounding caring for dying patients within a system that sought to deny death. The study shows how the nurses began to undertake practices as a, collective, defence against anxieties that were not being adequately acknowledged or 'contained' within the wider system. What was being felt (and resisted) at an individual level was also having a very real impact at the level of the team, contributing to an overall culture and practice of denial. What Menzies Lyth's study illustrates is the permeability of the emotional, personal, barriers between individuals and their team – what is felt at an individual level must also have an effect at the level of the team and the team will respond accordingly. Personal and team boundaries are also 'leaky'. Of course, we can witness this happening in many other ways, including how teams are currently adjusting their thinking and practices in the face of the COVID-19 threat – some directly or through co-validating invisible threats elsewhere (e.g. fears of covert surveillance through Zoom).

A colleague recently told of an author who wrote about his recurring dream of attempting to walk around a street corner but never being able to complete the journey through a fear of something dangerous lurking on the other side, until one night he decided to keep on walking 'to see what was there'. There was nothing. Teams can collude to stop short of the corner or keep on walking. William Halton (1994)[9] shows how teams can be halted when unconscious defences and denials are active, for example when 'complaints about the distribution of car-park spaces may also be a symbolic communication about managers who have no room for staff concerns.' Yiannis Gabriel's (2012)[10] work describes the haunting emotions that surfaced in an organisation undergoing sudden transformation involving

7 Stein, M. 2019. The lost Good Self: Why the whistleblower is hated and stigmatized. *Organization Studies*, November 2019.

8 Menzies, I. 1960 A case-study in the functioning of social systems as a defence against anxiety: A report on a study of the nursing service of a general hospital. *Human Relations*, 13(2), pp. 95–121.

9 Halton, W. 1994. Some unconscious aspects of organizational life: Contributions from psychoanalysis. In Obholzer, A. and Roberts, V. Z (eds), *The unconscious at work: Individual and organisational stress in the human services*. London: Routledge, Ch1.

10 Gabriel, Y. 2012. Organizations in a state of darkness: Towards a theory of organizational miasma. *Organization Studies*, 33(9), pp. 1137–1152.

staff loss. For many surviving members, the new organisation was tainted by the presence of 'murderers' (management) and 'corpses', employees who have been, or are about to be, dismissed. He writes of individuals and teams engulfed in a 'miasma', a toxic fog of fear and dread.

The personal cost of shame

Shame robs professionals of a sense of competence, of a sense of being good, or 'good enough'. It is visceral, it corrodes from within. Where feelings of guilt (aroused through unfair treatment and/or accusations within the wider system) are akin to the sense of having made a mistake – which can be repaired – shame leaves a wound which feels irreparable. In terms of psychoanalytic theory, shame is deeply embedded within an individual's inner world, linked to Freud's notion of the hyper-critical 'super ego' which constantly seeks to undermine and destroy people's sense of self-worth. We can think of the inner voice – the inner critic – of shame in direct opposition to the inner voice of support and encouragement, through an internalised 'good authority', as written about by Tom Pitt-Aikens and Alice Thomas Ellis (1989),[11] keeping us in touch with a sense of being cared for and kept in mind. Internally there may be a battle between feeling that we are/are not worthy, or good enough.

Shame is connected to loss because it is felt that something integral has been lost, and this is reflected through the way that FE leaders and colleagues are seen in the eyes of the world. Jean-Paul Sartre (2003)[12] describes the state of mind in which one's sense of self is 'swept away by shame'. Recent FETL research has shown how this has been enacted for some leaders within the sector (FETL, June 2020).[13] They spoke of:

11 Pitt-Aikens, T and Thomas Ellis, A. 1989 *Loss of the good authority: The cause of delinquency*. London: Penguin.
12 Sartre, Jean-Paul. 2003. *Being and nothingness*. Abingdon: Routledge Classics.
13 FETL. 2020. *Voices of the shamed: The personal toll of shame and shaming in further education*. FETL.

The wrenching losses experienced as a result of sudden exits allied to public shaming with no right of reply, and the loss of expertise and commitment to the sector that can follow

The trauma of suddenly losing authority, voice role and relationships with colleagues

Character assassination

[considering] suicide and [perceived failure as a leader] as the lowest point ever in their life. "I just couldn't stop saying why are they doing this?"

The publicly 'named and shamed' – leaders and their colleges – are attacked from external sources. Shame leaves people deeply damaged, within a seemingly dark and toxic world of blame where hope and creativity can also be destroyed, which prevents the light from shining through. From here it is a long and difficult voyage back to a sense of a good professional self.

Shame and the Good Self

The notion of a 'Good Self' emanates from Freud's and Klein's work on projection; where we can imbue others with emotions and feelings which are difficult to own. In the 2018 FETL Annual Lecture,[14] Mark Stein illustrates how the role of the whistle-blower is to expose lies and deceit and how the process takes from the accused a sense of their Good Self. This is because the accused have lost a sense of goodness and the ability to 'blow the whistle'. Stein's work shows how these accusations can be disturbing and deeply shaming, resulting in denial and vengeful attacks against the accuser – projecting back the bad self that the recipient(s) refuse to accept – in the form of alienation, blame and hatred. To the accused, the whistle-blower is saying 'you are not good *any more*', highlighting the loss of the most valued human qualities – honesty and integrity. Additionally, the implicit claim of being incompetent within a job role signifies a damaging sense

14 https://fetl.org.uk/resources/videos/the-fetl-annual-lecture-2018/

of failure. Consequently, according to Stein, it also fractures organisations along lines of the 'good' and 'bad' colleague.

Bringing this back to the FE sector, are some of the FE leaders who have participated so openly in this FETL series effectively 'blowing the whistle' on their paymasters? While much care has been taken to protect these leaders and their institutions, we do also need to consider what the implications may be for the sector as a whole and how this can become an opportunity for dialogue and understanding rather than retaliation and further damage. This leads us to acknowledge that institutions also suffer from the attribution of blame.

Naming the blaming and shaming

In order to move towards repair, it is important to name the sources of shame within the sector – its institutions, leaders and workforce – who have been left feeling like the occupiers of a crumbling, leaking, structure in desperate need of attention.

At a policy level, Matt Hamnett's paper (FETL, January 2019)[15] summarises this environment very well, including a 'near permanent state of revolution' over the past 20 years, featuring 25 major policy reforms. He charts the journey through the 2008/9 capital crisis, leaving 'many colleges high and not-even dry' and the disruption of the Area Review process, amidst a merger-led approach and apprenticeship reforms. He points to the proliferation of 'unfunded mandates', where levels of expectations outreached available – or planned – resources. What I found most striking in this account is the narrative of failure enforced upon the sector by those responsible for inspecting, governing and auditing its institutions. The account is littered with the terms 'inadequate', 'failure' and 'requires improvement'. I am left wondering about a duty of care towards the sector and where this responsibility currently resides.

15 FETL. 2019. *Beating the odds, and the system*. FETL.

As I write I am looking at the *FE Week* headline (March 8, 2019) which screamed 'THE TRUTH BEHIND THE HADLOW SCANDAL'. The front page goes on to list accusations of fraud, lies and deception. Stephen Exley (FETL, July 2020)[16] describes how this 'scandal' played out through the courts, with Hadlow becoming the first FE college to be placed into 'education administration' through the insolvency regime created by the Technical and Further Education Act of 2017 and how it 'marked the nadir of a turbulent period' in the sector. He also shows how the consequences of the attribution of failure damaged both leaders and the institutions in their care and raised serious questions about the effectiveness of the current regulatory model.

In reviewing this range of accounts there is a palpable sense of uncertainty, anxiety, threat, belittling and blame – all contributing to the insidious sense of shame that has become the focus of FETL's work over the past year.

16 FETL. 2020. *Burden of proof: Is evidence really the key to good policy design?* FETL.

THE COMPONENT PARTS OF REPAIR

Where there is damage there may, indeed must, be an opportunity for repair. It is important, therefore, to consider what may make this repair possible. As the damage of shame is internalised within individuals and structurally embedded within systems and institutions, I begin by outlining the component parts of repair as seen from an (individual) psychoanalytic perspective before considering how this knowledge may be applied at an institutional and sectoral level. In doing so, I am attempting to make this something that is 'do-able', consistent with the approach set out within the recent EDSK report (2020) towards 'whole system reform' characterised by 'collaboration, partnership and purpose'.

In the 1990s I undertook research into the Construction Skills Certification Scheme in south London, particularly in relation to issues of skills and equality. I visited construction sites and met with site managers, as well as the FE (and training) providers involved. What I remember is something exciting about seeing this system from the inside, the drive towards quality and, difficult though some of the equality issues may have been, an attempt to address them by all these partners. Around this time I was also responsible for commissioning research from the Local Futures Group into the concept of the 'networked college', which I am now pleased to see revived through the recent report *The English College of the Future* (2020).[17] There

17 Independent Commission on the College of the Future. 2020. *The English college of the future*. November 2020. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5c8847f58dfc8c45fa705366/t/5fb641cefa02c43a33403fc6/1605779919957/ICCF+England.pdf

is something about being recognised as an 'anchor' in a local community that speaks of the critical role for colleges and learning providers in leading the way to recovery. Beyond local economic policy, an anchor also implies something solid to provide stability in a time of turbulence.

The theory of mourning and reparation

The psychoanalytic concept of reparation is about individual recovery and repair; the repair of losses through the healthy and natural process of mourning. It is driven by guilt – for imagined injuries inflicted on others – and restoration of a sense of the good that is feared lost. Throughout this process of writing I have had an image in my mind of a visit to a large FE college in the early 2000s. In the entrance hall young people were vaulting the security barriers, the reception staff overwhelmed. During the short meeting the inspirational young Vice Principal had to deal with several emergency calls. I was trying to ask him about strategy, he was talking about – and this is what I most clearly remember – 'turning the tanker around.'

This is familiar to all: when the grief is so deep and the task so large that the effort required to recover will be tanker-like, but it is attempted anyway. As was famously remarked, 'We do it, not because it is easy but because it is hard.' This is in no way to diminish the experiences of those who cannot recover, for whom recovery becomes impossible, and who deserve the deepest respect.

Indeed, psychoanalytic theory shows what a struggle this recovery can be. Freud's original (1916)[18] paper on this topic depicts the human aversion to mourning through recognition of the difficulties in accepting transience – in this case as summer turned to autumn – and that all that 'was precious has proved not to be lasting'. In this way, the psychoanalyst Stephen Grosz (2014)[19] talks about the potential need to mourn the future – the future once hoped for but now fading away. Most importantly, as emphasised by Howard Stein (2001),[20] loss is inseparable from change: 'all change is loss, and all loss has to be mourned…' Some people – and institutions – are better at this than others.

This body of work also shows the damaging mental health effects of an inability to mourn. Ron Britton (2015)[21] describes the potential for failed mourning, like Miss Havisham in *Great Expectations*, where 'grief can become pathologically arrested in an attempt to freeze time; so that present loss cannot be transformed into a past event', forever leaving the bereaved in a stained and tattered wedding dress of despair. Which is also where Freud's (1917)[22] description of the 'open wound' of impossible-to-mourn loss is so helpful, in being able to acknowledge a perpetual, oozing, scar that will not heal.

What distinguishes psychoanalytic theory from other cultural, sociological or popular understandings of loss and mourning are the – below-surface – unconscious dynamics involved. While painfully aware of many of our losses, the strength of these thoughts has a basis within the individual's inner world where deeply held (and difficult to face) past losses may reside and be replayed through reminders from the external world. Powerful anxieties also arise from a variety of 'everyday' events, including the fear of being rejected by a friend, partner or organisation, being ignored, being asked to move desks, or home (in the widest sense). As research, including my own, has shown, experiences in the present can re-awaken, strengthen and bring to the surface many deeper feelings of loss. This is particularly true in the case of trauma because traumatic events will almost certainly cause a sense of loss at both conscious and unconscious levels. In the

18 Freud, S. 1916. On transience. *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV (1914–1916). London: Vintage Classics, pp. 303–307.

19 Grosz, S. 2014. *The examined life: How we lose and find ourselves*. London: Vintage.

20 Stein, H. F. 2001. *Nothing personal, just business: A guided journey into organizational darkness*. Westport, CT: Quorum Books.

21 Britton, R. 2015. The mountains of primal grief. Paper delivered to the conference Love and loss: Why grief matters, London, October.

22 Freud, S. 1917. On mourning and melancholia. *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XIV (1914–1916). London: Vintage Classics, pp. 237–258.

most extreme cases, for example where families are forced to flee their home country and face life-threatening journeys, there is clearly the loss of what has been left behind (e.g. home, wider family, familiar food, community) and this situation is also a psychic cauldron in which deeper fears of catastrophe, starvation, rejection and abandonment may come to the boil. In other ways – as in the trauma of being 'let go', disciplined or made redundant – a loss of self may also be palpable, potentially played out in feelings of worthlessness; of never being loved, wanted or 'good enough'. In the example of families forced to migrate it may be possible to imagine the immense sense of worthlessness or failure – *the shame* – experienced by a parent leading a child on this dangerous journey and unable to provide nourishment to his or her child.

To many, this may chime with the experience of 'lockdown' where families have been separated and vulnerable older people denied the reassurance, warmth and comfort of those they love. The images and accounts of parents, children and grandchildren across the world reaching out to each other through gates, masks and Perspex screens have told of this painful shame.

The experience of being shamed is highly traumatic for those directly accused and their colleagues. As shown above, it is also about loss, of the 'Good Self', the 'good authority' and the 'good institution'. In order to recover from the trauma of shame there needs to be a process of mourning. Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Paula Hyde and Alan Thomas (2003)[23] write about their research with a public-sector, front-line team trying to recover from the death of their leader and the process of quiet and reflective mourning – attempting to hold on to and restore all of the good values imbued in that leader – on their journey to repair. As Tom Pitt-Aikens (1989) argues, the loss of the – internalised – 'good authority' can only be recovered through mourning. In relation to the process of repair, psychoanalytic theory also suggests that successful mourning is associated with creativity,

23 Hyde, P. and Thomas, A. B. 2003. When a leader dies. *Human Relations*, 56(8), pp.1005–1024.

including through art, as a way of recovering something of a lost past – or through re-imaging a hoped-for future. In the early 2000s this sense of reparation was a strong theme within the UK Mental Health Foundation's annual calendar series, where art and poetry were used to show how contributors had developed new and creative capacities of hope through the mourning process.

What this shows is how mourning is integral to the process of recovery. It also shows how there is an element of responsibility that needs to be acknowledged for this process to be successful. This is about looking at Miss Havisham from another angle; her responsibility and her regret in, and about, what feels irreparable. Not being able to do so – living in a frozen state of denial – prevents her learning from the events, acknowledging the full complexity of the situation and coming to realise that there is an animated life and hope beyond the crisis. Can it be possible to repair without widening the lens, to let more light in? Of course, the courage required to do this is immense but is it only from this position – however painful – that individuals, organisations and

THE RESTORATIVE POTENTIAL OF 'LEADERHOOD'

societies can learn and become wiser?

The following reflections are drawn together from the preceding sections and a range of sources that have informed this paper, exploring the potential of 'leaderhood' as a reparative resource and process. It refers to leadership across the FE system as a whole.

Embracing the primary task of repair

What has struck me most about working with FE and FETL colleagues and through reading the various FETL/ sectoral reports and publications, is the commitment at the heart of FE to the learners, and particularly the role of leaders and staff in providing a 'second chance' for those less privileged within the social and educational systems. *This makes repair the primary task of FE*.

As noted in the recent EDSK/FETL report (2020) and by Dame Ruth in the (2015) *Remembered Thinking* report,[24] which helped to establish FETL's ethos and direction, this primary task risks becoming obscured within the sector owing to policy makers failure to understand this. According to Dame Ruth 'the detail confuses politicians, who, on the whole, did not arrive *via* the FE route, and policy makers – but, for the most part, it works, to one degree or another, and, when it works well, it is a beautiful thing.

Looking back to look forward

It would appear to follow naturally from knowing the primary task for a leader to understand their personal role – and

24 FETL. 2015. *Remembered thinking… On further education and leading*. FETL.

responsibility – in, and to, the system. As asked by one of the participants in the FETL (2016)[25] 'Working Well' project, of themselves 'what is the system here?' From a positive, reparative, perspective these internal and external systems will be mutually supportive – as they ought to be – only if leaders are given the time and space to think about such questions. Indeed, several participants in the FETL 'Working Well' project acknowledged the benefits of 'looking inside' themselves in this way; according to one participant in terms of 'Fixing other people and fixing myself – my organisation – I have gone much more inside.' Another participant stressed that it is 'critical to understand who you are and realise *your* impact.'

Shame is a complex emotion that touches upon and triggers an embedded sense of worthlessness in those who experience it. To explore the roots of this emotion may be emancipatory, in revealing and understanding what lies within and becoming able to put external criticism back in its place in the wider scheme of things; to recognise that – as in vengeful attacks on the a whistle-blower – this is largely about others 'passing the buck' of responsibility.

When viewed it this way, it also becomes possible to see how shame impacts others within and across the system, hence spreading into the 'livery of shame.' To see this process enables a leader to begin to address this spread. As stressed by Dame Ruth in her original shame provocation (FETL 2019),[26] repair can be fostered through an inclusive, open, compassionate culture, 'where it is possible to acknowledge vulnerability, to talk openly about failure, rather than sinking deeper into defensive mindsets, and to learn […]'.

Making amends, reconciliation and restorative justice

For many, the notion of reparation is about repairing a nation, linked most notably to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission established in South Africa in 1995, charged with the task of healing wounds and making amends for the atrocities of the apartheid system. Following this lead, other commissions have been established in Canada and Australia to attempt to hear truths, to say 'sorry' and to reconcile the costs of systemic processes of alienation and discrimination. These processes are driven by remorse and regret, imparting a sense of hope at an individual, community, institutional and societal level.

There is also a potential link to notions of restorative justice, which brings together those harmed by crime or conflict and those responsible for the harm, in the process 'enabling everyone affected by a particular incident to play a part in repairing the harm and finding a positive way forward.'[27] According to Nelson Mandela, this means 'working together to correct the legacy of past injustice' and accepting that holding onto anger and resentment will mean being forever imprisoned. All those within the system have an opportunity to create a space for this form of reconciliation.

Michael Fischer (2012)[28] shows how avoiding reconciliation can lead to destructive forms of authority, in this case to reactions to a homicide (of one patient by another) in a community mental health organisation. He argues that engaging with the painful reality of the homicide might have led to reparative grieving and recovery, also promoting individual and organisational learning. A link can possibly be made here with the ongoing Grenfell Inquiry, which appears focused more on apportioning blame than on reconciliation and reparative grieving.

Within the FE sector there may be opportunities for truth and reconciliation at policy or institutional level, so that, at the very least, those concerned may air their feelings of remorse and regret which they will otherwise keep to themselves in a

25 FETL. 2016. *How can psychoanalysis and systems theory contribute to the leadership of thinking in the further education and skills sector?* FETL.
26 FETL. 2019. *Shame, learning and repair: Fostering compassion in organisational life*. FETL.
27 UK Restorative Justice Council. https://restorativejustice.org.uk/what-restorative-justice
28 Fischer, M. D. 2012. Organizational turbulence, trouble and trauma: Theorizing the collapse of a mental health setting. *Organization Studies*, 33(9), pp. 1153–1173.

potentially damaging way. There is a potential role for ministers, policy-makers, governing bodies and institutional leaders to be the good authority in guiding this process of repair.

The link to remorse and regret

The common theme here is 're-', which signifies a deep wish to go back and start again – to do it more wisely next time. However, that wisdom can only come from learning from mistakes, from seeing the cracks and attempting to repair them. To feel remorse is to feel hope, akin to the creative *potential* in making a mistake. For some of us the realisation that mistakes will be made, and are acceptable and common, can be transformative. As truth and reconciliation commissions and reparative justice processes have shown, all those within a system have the option to stand up and say 'sorry', even if their responsibility is distant and/or limited. Others within the system have the right to hear this apology. To recognise this responsibility honours the inter-personal and inter-dependent connections involved – across a system or institutional setting – and opens the door to reflection and learning for all involved.

Creating opportunities for mourning

The FETL (2020) 'Voices of the shamed' project highlights how:

> *experiencing this sense of loss without the opportunity for closure made it difficult for participants to move on or to adequately process their experiences*

In my own research into an organisation that was attempting to make repairs after a failed merger which had left the leader and several members of staff stranded, there was an attempt to create a 'formative' mourning space to work through their loss. While the responses to the effectiveness of this attempt were mixed, emphasising the complications of mourning, overall, those involved reported that it had been helpful, and healing, particularly within a wider effort to 'look back in order to look forward' and to become more open and accepting. According to one participant:

> *We've had a go to try and explore and work out what it was and we may have some idea as to what it is, we're not entirely sure that we're ever going to get to the bottom of what it is […] but I think the various different forums and settings to have these conversations has allowed for the mind and the self to be more open and accepting of some of the madness that kind of goes on.*

The findings from this case also showed how the organisation's core 'framework of values', a legacy from the lost organisation, related strongly to their attempt (individually and as a group) to 'hold on' to their sense of identity and, in turn, supported their resilience. In this case these values were primarily directed towards the vulnerable children and families they were tasked to support. I am also reminded here about this powerful statement from the leader of the organisation about an inherent human wish to recover and repair:

> *To be loved, to be accepted, to be nurtured. There's nothing greater, I think, and I think most of us spend our lives searching for the missing experiences that we've never quite had.*

This sentiment is echoed by several participants in the 'Working Well' project. One leader spoke about the need to 'take love seriously' and another about 'giving people time to grieve and about love as a positive force […]' and – echoing both the psychoanalytic and truth and reconciliation views of reparation – 'how to use love in a positive way in looking to the future.'

That repair is both creative and relational

The FETL (2020) 'Voices of the Shamed' project also found that some participants had received support in learning sets and leadership groups outside the sector, or from former mentors or coaches and within a 'learning culture.' This is to remember that people operate within an inter-dependent system, at a societal

and institutional/ organisational level and that networks of support are very valuable. We cannot repair alone. Just as 'it takes a village to raise a child', it requires all parties within a system to work towards repair, through a supportive, reflective and creative approach. This process also needs to be led. Sir Chris Husbands' recent paper (FETL, June 2020)[29] demands 'a greater curiosity of care' within FE institutions, particularly in looking towards a post-COVID future.

Embedding a duty of care

In the recent *English Colleges of the Future* report (2020), I found several references to 'duty': a duty to establish networks, a duty towards complementary provision, and a duty to align institutional strategy with overarching strategy. While these all appear important, there is no reference to a duty of care. Surely – and I believe this is what Sir Chris Husbands is suggesting – this is the most important duty of all. In a time of uncertainty, when the world feels like it is collapsing, when individuals are being made to feel that they are to blame, when leaders feel powerless and learners feel worthless, is this not the time to care? Is this not the time for those accusers within the system to become more compassionate? Is this not the time for leaders to be protected and supported by their regulators and governors? Is this not the time for learners to be told – to be shown – that, as a sector, we have a duty of care towards you? *English Colleges of the Future* does, however, highlight Burnley College's 'destination recovery' initiative, supporting people, productivity and place in the process of recovery from COVID-19. In bringing this duty together in a cohesive way, this may be very good approach for other colleges (and their local partners) to consider, if care is the core concern.

29 FETL. 2020. *Leadership, learning and lockdown: First thoughts on lessons for leadership from the coronavirus crisis*. FETL.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I was tasked to think about how institutions can repair the damage caused by shame. This process has made me realise that I know more about damage than I do about repair. It has left me realising just how difficult I have found that part of the cycle, and that maybe this also shows how this crucial aspect is currently under-discussed and under-explored in terms of policy, strategy and leadership. Part of this difficulty is perhaps obvious: the healthy mourning essential to repair is a very complicated process. It requires an acknowledgement, working towards acceptance, that there is something to mourn and something worth mourning.

The acceptance is about looking *within* – for institutional leaders, both within themselves and their institutions. It is about facing what lurks around the corner in the middle of the night. It may be about regret and remorse, if mistakes have been made. At all levels of the system it is about seeing and facing the suffering of others for whom they are responsible, for whom they have a duty of care. This is not about blame but about awareness, compassion and commitment.

It is also about looking *around*, for leaders to see their place in the wider system and how their institutions have been damaged *by* that system. In this way they may be able to see more clearly that it is their place within that ecosystem – as a receptor of blame and shame – that feels so damaging. It is also about acknowledging that the emotion of shame has little to do with the 'here and now'. It is an outcome of inner-world fears and past experiences. It is very hard to face up to things that cannot be

seen; there is a place here for self-compassion, for resisting blame, and for exploring ways to bring these ghosts to the surface. Doing so is likely to develop one's capacity to recognise the difficulties and motivations of others. It is telling how the participants on the 'Working Well' project, all leaders within the FE sector, recognised the benefits of exploring their inner worlds and feelings in a therapeutic way, as shown in a series of personal reflections on the FETL website.

It is also about leaders looking *below,* to their staff and learners, and remembering their primary motive, the thing that initially brought them into the sector and which has seen them rise to a position of authority. It is then about using that authority in a 'good' way, stepping up and 'calling out' systemic failures in the way that the Black Lives Matter movement has done so effectively in the past few months. In terms of leaderhood, this is exemplified by the 'Friday message' (5 June 2020) by Dr Paul Klotman, President and CEO of the Baylor College of Medicine in Houston, Texas, in the aftermath of the killing of George Floyd. The focus of this message to his school community is about championing the 'physician's oath' – an inherent duty of care – and recognising moments when all members of a community need to 'step up', to take a position and to defend vulnerable people within that community. He stresses how nobody stepped up for George Floyd, and he was *asking* for help. There is a deep shame in this realisation. In contextualising this atrocity, he draws parallels to COVID-19 as a global existential threat, and points towards the systemic injustice in institutional racism, just as likely 'to wipe us out as a society'.[30]

Dr Klotman ends his message by congratulating learners who have stood up against systemic racism in a peaceful way that respected their position as trainee physicians with a duty of care, and as leaders of the future.

On a systemic level he has initiated research looking at the death of African Americans in police custody, positioning this as a public health issue. This puts the issue on the public policy agenda, with professional authority, as something to be addressed *through and by* the system.

If we are to learn from this example we need to ask what are the public education issue(s) here and how do leaders – and college communities – step up to address them? How do learners turn their 'livery of shame' into a livery of pride? In the fog of public policy debate, is it about reminding all concerned that learners' lives matter? In doing so does this then reflect back on the importance of the lives of those who are leading and delivering this learning process? This example also shows the importance of storytelling, in this case on a weekly basis, to paint the picture of the road ahead to all within the community – another 'destination repair'. This example is a story of resilience, integrity and pride. Creating this narrative provides an opportunity for leaders to imagine and describe the future, to make repair and recovery tangible and achievable – to inspire hope. This is the antithesis of denial and the antidote to shame.

More broadly, is it also worth remembering that life is a continual process of repair as things (material, social, personal and institutional) break and fracture? Individuals and organisations are forever exposed and vulnerable to damage and attack – from outside and within. Cracks will inevitably appear, in the fabric of institutions and the mind. Some of these attacks, as in the case of shaming and blaming, are particularly damaging and may feel unsurvivable. But organisations within FE are specifically equipped to both look at and through these cracks, to see how they have been caused and how to repair them. This is because, through providing a second chance to learners from all backgrounds and communities, the primary task of FE *is* repair. On one level, the sector teaches these skills, from construction to creative media. On another level it promotes continual progression, from essential to higher-level skills, making learning a constant process of personal development. This may be both about repairing a damaged prior life and/or educational experience as well as building the *capacity for repair* into the learning and skills process.

30 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d13oo85ISwY

This process is arguably also about creating a new livery for teachers, other support staff and – primarily – learners within the FE sector. This livery is based on the pride of being part of a sector with a core responsibility to restore economic activity – through, for example, hairdressing and beauty, hospitality and catering and construction. From this basis, social justice can also flourish, so long as equality – another core concern within FE – is also woven into this fabric. It is the creation of these hand, craft and productive skills that is central to the latest government policy for recovery. In the latest lockdown, construction sites still remain open. Is this also an environment demanding systemic leadership through learning and skills – about being adaptable to an unknown future? This is the time for FE to step up and be counted. Where institutional reputations have been damaged it is about restoring pride in what those institutions do best, be it forestry, hospitality and catering, engineering or social media – or all of these.

On a very practical level is it also about maintaining the art of repair within a society of replacement? Anyone who has visited their local recycling centre recently will have noticed piles of discarded flat-screen TVs. At one time there was a TV repair shop on every high street and repair was considered a valuable, worthwhile – and socially responsible – activity. Goods are now largely designed to be either disposable or replaceable, making craft skills largely obsolete and caring redundant. This said, we are also witnessing an important countermove in terms of a restoration of traditional craft industries, of which hand-built, steel, bicycle frames is a particular favourite. As builders of traditional bicycle frame will stress, steel – unlike aluminium or carbon fibre – is a material that can be repaired, if the requisite skill and care is applied.

On another level is it also about accepting the wisdom of living with imperfection as an integral facet of life as demonstrated through the philosophy of *Wabi-sabi* (侘寂), an approach based on accepting the transience and imperfection of the world. A Japanese aesthetic derived from Buddhism, Wabi-Sabi embraces the wisdom that comes from recognising the cracks in everything. To this end, psychoanalyst, D. W. Winnicott (1960),[31] provided one of the most helpful concepts to those responsible for parenting – within and beyond the family: the notion of a 'good enough mother'. As a concept adaptable to leadership, this involves being able to tolerate the frustrations of others, being empathic and nurturing, and being able to withstand attacks and contain anxieties – all very important qualities of leaderhood.

And it also implies that there is no perfect offering – as our internal and external regulators demand: we can only ever be 'good enough'. In this sense, to repair is rebuild, to carefully put something back together again with a focus on its inherently good and valuable qualities.

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Dr Bob Townley, University of York Management School, November 2020

31 Winnicott, D. W. (1960). The theory of the parent–infant relationship. In Caldwell, L and Joyce, A. (eds). 2011. *Reading Winnicott*. London: Routledge and Institute of Psychoanalysis, pp. 147–169.

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