

'Two stars and a wish':

can the best of ourselves really be regulated?

David Zigmond

© 2018

5

Regulations are sometimes mandatory for public safety, probity and decency. But what is the role of the regulator in our subtler activities of Welfare?

Eve's predicament is now common: it should caution us.

If the camel once gets his nose in the tent, his body will soon follow

– Arabic proverb

Eve's colitis has flared again and she thinks she knows why. Dr G, her gastroenterologist, a year ago, thought her disease was fuelled and exacerbated by worries and tensions that she otherwise parried and masked. No, she didn't want to see a psychologist, but yes, she would see another doctor, a peer of Dr G...

*

Eve, now sixty, first describes for me a life of stability, warmth and meaning. She tells me of good family relationships, an affectionately solid marriage, a friendly village neighbourhood, and a long career as a local primary school teacher. But a little over thirty years ago, after difficulty in conceiving, she lost her only, much-yearned for child at birth: she never conceived again. With apparent alacrity she managed to transmute and sublimate much of her grief into her work: 'I've always loved teaching small children ... it gives me such pleasure – joy often – to see them explore and learn and grow ... I've been doing it thirty-five years and I've never wanted promotion: I'm happy in the classroom with children, not in an office with meetings and documents', she told me a year ago.

*

But now she tells me of an unravelling of this *modus vivendi* and with it the recurrence of her bowel's inflammatory response. Eve's wide, friendly face becomes streamed with apologetic tears as her wet-choked voice ventures an explanation.

'It's work, doctor ... not the actual teaching and certainly not the children. It's all the increasing rules and regulations about what we've got to do – all the documentation we have to provide ... We're all buckling.

'I'm much older than all the others ... they just can't take, it, you see. We get brilliant young teachers: enthusiastic, warm, bright ... but they only stay for a few years [in teaching] – those that don't leave mostly get burned-out or ill. I don't want to be one of them. Yes, I know I'm much older, but I still love my job...'

I ask Eve to give me an example of what is so difficult.

'*Two stars and a wish* probably captures it', she says.

I gesture my incomprehension.

'Well, as you know, I teach 4-5 year-olds. There's now a mandated scheme for all of us primary teachers to document how we both encourage and offer guiding corrections and suggestions to *every* child after *every* lesson. And then we have to document further how we will action and monitor our 'wish', and then what the outcome is ... for every child! Can you imagine how much work that is?

'It sounds pretty, doesn't it, *Two stars and a wish*? Fairyland! But it's anything but: it's management madness. It certainly doesn't help me become a better teacher – quite the reverse: it's making me ill; now I can't even get to work! And so the others that remain become even more stressed...

'In saner and better days they trusted us to know and do our job – that's being a professional, isn't it? But now no-one's trusted to decide or do anything. My skill has been to know which child needs what kind of attention, and to tailor that as best I can in a busy classroom. There's a lot of skill and judgement in that – it's never perfect, but it's something that no regulations or formulae can match. Yet that's the kind of management that's taking over ... that's what's killing off the work I've loved. And I don't want to lose it all, not yet...' Eve swallows her tears again.

*

As Eve shuts the door behind her at the end of our session, I am wondering how the governing and regulatory bodies come up with such schemes. In a reverie I imagine a personified dialogue between a regulator (Reggie) and his senior algorithmician (Alginon):

R: Algie, most teachers may be doing a good job in encouraging and guiding children, but there's still variation in standards and, of course, that's now always unacceptable. Also we always need more evidence of what everybody's actually doing...

A: Well, then we need to standardise what they all do, and have tight systems to implement and document everything. It always seems to me such a shambles without...

R: How do we do that, then?

A: Well, we have to break down the roles of teachers into key tasks and then code, proceduralise and monitor them all.

R: Excellent! Hm. Let's see. So: all good teaching – like good parenting – needs a mixture of encouragement and support – alongside structure, critical suggestions or corrections, instructions and so forth ... We'll need to find a way to break down, proceduralise and measure all this.

A: Should we have equal amounts ... of encouragement and correction, say?

R: Mm ... No. Not with children, not usually: we have to make it seem positive, at least to begin with ... How do we simplify all that? And we'll need an attractive package...

A: How about calling it *Two stars and a wish*?

R: Oh, brilliant! Very glittery! But Algie, more seriously, how do we get compliance?

A: The usual, Reg: procedures and documentation. For every teacher with every child, in every lesson. We insist on it. You know the drill – then we know it always gets done.

R: You're very good at designing such things. Can you help us with this?

A: Sure. First, we create a computer template, and you, all the authorities, then make it a clear statutory requirement that it's always filled in by the teachers.

R: So far, so good. But I have to think ahead, too ... the commissioners and inspectors will want *data* about the *effectiveness* of all this. Can you help us here, also?

A: Yes, we can simply expand the templates: the *wishes* can be linked to a necessary 'action-plan' box, and then a series of time-intervalled 'outcome' boxes. All mandatory, got to be. Would that satisfy the powers-that-be?

R: Yes, it all sounds impressively coherent ... But I'm just wondering: is it all too much? ... for the teachers and children, I mean.

A: What?! I haven't a clue, Reg. It's really not my area, or my problem ... You're asking the wrong man there!

My reveried fantasy-dialogue is interrupted and foreshortened: I am told my next appointment is here, awaiting a real-life dialogue with me. It is Rashid: a young, yet already stress-addled, and now sickened, GP.

*

Rashid is three decades younger than Eve, and a neophyte GP, not a veteran primary school teacher. Their symptom taxonomy, too, is very different. But what is disturbingly similar is the intolerability they both describe: the nature of procedurally strangulated and mistrustfully depersonalised Welfare services to which they both wished to bring their vocational spirit.

The reason for this destructive gulf, between the human and the institutional? *REMIC* (remote management, inspection and compliance) has forged successive reforms that have largely driven out our erstwhile better human sense, sensibility and vocation. Hence it is that as Welfare's management plans become apparently tighter and more consummate its workforce ails and peels away.

Eve had, at least, many years of her profession's earlier and more wholesome, but now dying, opportunities and gratifications. But what lies ahead for Rashid?

-----0-----

Men reform a thing by removing reality from it, then do not know what to do with the unreality that is left.

GK Chesterton (1928), *Generally Speaking*

*

Interested? Many articles exploring similar themes are available via David Zigmond's home page on www.marco-learningsystems.com

David Zigmond would be pleased to receive your FEEDBACK