

## The Dish on Mentors, Mentees, and Parmesan Cheese

- “Where’s Eddie? No Seriously, Is Eddie Ok?”

We had lost our first participant and the retreat was not much more than a day into the three day experience in Los Altos. With images of tigers in the hotel, unexpected missing teeth, regrettable tattoos and vicious sunburns, I was not only glad that Vegas rules most likely applied to this trip, but more importantly, that garlic bread was on the way. Answers to life’s questions required food for the body, and this retreat was just like a big Italian meal, complete with unexpected flavors, brilliant conversations, a rich dessert, and at the end of it all, an appetite for more.

The day before, in winding up the serpentine road towards *El Retiro de San Ignacio*, the Jesuit Retreat center where we stayed, every ascending turn took me farther from the din of street traffic and the pressures of the office. The trees and flowers showed signs of spring waking February from its winter slumber and the sun shone fully through the Spanish windows of the retreat house, where Estella, our mentor, greeted us with a reassuring smile. I have to admit, before going into this experience, the idea of “retreat” always reminded me of running away. In a way, the bucolic setting made me feel a peace in escaping, or running away from the office, much like ducking under a crashing wave and enjoying the still silence of the water below the surface. The retreat center was that space of stillness in which silence allowed that small, inner voice, filled with questions, to be amplified: What should I expect to find here? Where is my leadership path taking me? Who would I be meeting?

- “No seriously, where is Eddie?”

Back at the restaurant, between wafts of parmesan and sips of Chianti, texts flew and calls were made to locate our companion. As the salads came out and the waitress took our entrée orders, we chatted loudly in the upper room as Duke Ellington’s *Money Jungle* played in the background. The day’s events were recounted in groups small and large, with the occasional toast that kept time with the music and the clinking of silverware on white porcelain plates.

- “I thought I would prefer to have an emergency appendicitis” I said, referring to the name game that *Devastating Derrick* or Dean Booth for the rest of the world, had us do as our first ice breaker. We all looked for a way out of the meeting room as we realized that we would have to go around the room and painstakingly name every participant with their mnemonic system, while St. Ignatius looked on with a wise smile from his portrait on the wall. Even the comfortable relaxing chairs could not make this game comfortable nor relaxing and, luckily, it was Eddie that was chosen to go first.

“You know what though...?” my dinner friend said to me, “After that, we knew everyone’s name. “That’s right, we were no longer just participants”. True. We had taken a huge step towards what Eddie would share later as the Buddhist idea of *Sangha*, the joyful, harmonious synergy created within a group working towards a common goal. That’s also how we knew it was Eddie who had gone missing and not just “that guy” from Southern California somewhere. Oh, the irony.

The dinner was taking a long time to come out and we had slowly made every piece of lettuce last while the music changed to a more classical violin piece. The kitchen must not have expected such a large group of twenty five people. Well, twenty four to be exact with our missing companion. The time allowed us further reflection on the activities that filled our days: sharing leadership contracts, learning about the DISC Inventory and its practicality for examining organizational structures, and getting practical sessions on legal advice and issues facing all administrators, just to name a few. Our time with Kevin Trutna, another mentor, who had offered his valuable insights into using DISC to examine our own leadership styles and ways to use it to grow professionally, proved to be of quite some significance to all of us, and in the end, revealed a commonality of experience that we all had gleaned from our small group discussions.

- "It doesn't matter if you are from the beach, the desert, or rural northern California" said my friend to the right, "we all go through the same." She was definitely right in more than her location relative to me. She had vocalized the powerful realization that we are not alone in our experiences. The issues we are facing are the same despite location and we sensed that this retreat, this time under the waves, was a very safe space in which to discuss them—a familial frame around the entire weekend that allowed for honesty. With honesty came tough questions that didn't have immediate answers.

- "I guess that's why leadership is a journey," someone chimed in. The leader's road is as winding as the way back to retreat center that night; filled with steep inclines and areas without light that made it easy to stumble or get lost.

Luckily, the meal arrived before the second round of Chianti did, as the conversation levels had risen to drown out the music. With the arrival of the food, the sounds shifted to the clatter of consuming the artisanal dishes, the tri color pastas, rich lasagna and delicately prepared sea food. The conversations took a richer tone as well.

- "An effective leader inspires, brings out the best in people".

Thus began the focus on shifting from the practical operational skills that the retreat had offered us thus far onto the bigger picture philosophies of leadership. Notably, Jim Walker had earlier given us a keen insight into the mind of the hiring managers and how they discern which applicants make it through the Human Resources gauntlet to senior executive leadership positions. Yet again, we came back to the questions of: *"What changes do you want to make? What calls you to leadership? Do you have to be an administrator to be a leader? What is effective leadership?"* These questions peppered the conversation as the waitress removed the dinner plates and prepared the table with smaller ones. Orders for coffee went in and desserts were chosen in anticipation of something sweet to balance the rich flavors of the dishes that we had just enjoyed.

So the coffee arrived, and so did the chocolate cream pie. So did (allegedly) some late night singing, playing "name that movie" game, and us generally getting louder as the night surrendered to day. It was a night that could have involved that tiger previously mentioned, or at least the missing tooth, but mostly one thing we knew was different in our return was that we had begun to move as a group. We were quickly becoming a *sangha*, a *familia* who doesn't leave anyone behind.

- "Where's Eddie?"

For some, morning came unforgivingly early. For others, the quiet hiking trails beckoned for an early reflective stroll. Our closing activities included the sharing of leadership books and our own reflections on the retreat. Dina “Blaze” was the last mentor standing and she guided the reflections that came after a short night. We didn’t know at that time how much the retreat would impact us, but the closing was difficult. The crashing waves of emails awaited us on our phones and the noise from the office was growing louder and louder as we descended the hill for the last time on Friday.

Was it in the folding of our napkins, our worrying over our companion, when taking the last sip of coffee at the restaurant, or was it walking back to the retreat center when we realized that we were not alone on this journey? For me *retreat* was no longer a synonym for running away. It was a pause, a reflection. A brief time under the waves, where we came to understand that it wasn’t so much what we are running from, but what we are running towards. Forging ahead as a *sangha*.

- “Eddie, are you okay?”
- “Yes, I fell asleep! Thanks for checking on me!”

May everyone’s leadership journey be as meaningful as our big Italian meal. May it be filled with unexpected but flavorful turns, conversations like spices that make you sweat sometimes, toasts that remind you of a shared purpose, sweet desserts that call you back again for more... and wonderful companions that always know where you are.

From the mentor class of 2016, we wish you *Buon Appetito!*