



Reflections from my week as one of Canada's Outstanding Principals

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As I exited the elevator into the lobby of the Delta Chelsea Hotel, I was overcome with a myriad of emotions. The ever-changing winds of February in Ontario were an obvious metaphor for the pride, trepidation, wonder, joy, confusion and resolution that the next five days would bring. We started on a cold grey Sunday afternoon that gave way to clear sunny skies for much of the week only to see snow and sleet cancel flights, close highways and extend our stay for an extra day. For Canada's Outstanding Principals, it was a normal week.

My personal journey started on November 20, 2006 when an e-mail arrived from Jon Powell of The Learning Partnership. Jon's message offered congratulations and noted that my nomination package had been passed on to him by Don Rait, CPCO president, for presentation to the National Selection Committee. I was asked to e-mail the second Personal Case Story directly to him. My immediate reaction was, "Huh?" Later that day, Ray Power, vice-principal of Ursuline College Chatham, explained that it was he, in concert with Ann Sutton, St. Clair Catholic District School Board superintendent of education, who had spearheaded my nomination. I was truly humbled for I believed then, as I do now, that my nomination was in recognition of a body of work by a large supporting cast and served to validate the efforts of all the principals and vice-principals in the St. Clair CDSB. The notification that I was to be one of the 32 leaders in education chosen to be honoured by The Learning Partnership came in January. That press release brought a flurry of interviews from print media, television stations, and live radio. I must admit to having been a little bemused when I overheard one prospective parent remark at our annual open house, "yeah, and this school has the outstanding principal too." I was most gratified to hear from family, friends, colleagues and especially the many support staff, who took time to acknowledge that my award was well deserved.

The Delta Chelsea served as a gathering place but our leadership sessions for the week were held at the Rotman School of Management. Sunday was organized to provide an opportunity for us to get to know one another and to share some of our story. John Michael Talbot's song, *St. Teresa's Prayer*, came to mind, "Christ has no body now but ours." It was immediately apparent that, despite our cultural and spiritual differences, we were all doing Christ's work. All of the people that I met had three things in common: an unwavering love of learning, compassion for the children under their care, and a recognition that life must extend beyond school.

Each principal in attendance had another interest, hobby or pursuit that served to balance his or her life. Each cherished moments with family and friends and used their interpersonal relationships to bring focus and perspective to their work world.

The next four days, although long and challenging, were also enjoyable and rewarding. It struck me as we heard from a number of presenters from both the worlds of education and business, just how well-read each was, and how life-long learning and leadership were inexorably linked. I also recall the passion with which Veronica Lacey, president and CEO of The Learning Partnership, defended publicly funded education and her acknowledgement of Catholic boards as being an integral part of public education in Ontario. Presenter after presenter challenged us to re-examine our role as leaders in public education. I have noted just a few of my favourite sentiments and points of debate from my week at Rotman:

- Education is a knowledge industry: quality and access are the keys to being competitive.
- Evidence matters but will not replace politics.
- All change is a threat to somebody.
- Reshape the question, to find new solutions.
- Special needs programs must focus on citizenship and the right to contribute.
- Educators must get used to transparency.
- Change comes through motivation.
- Give experiences, not rationale.
- Eighty per cent of major change initiatives fail to achieve their intended gain largely due to emotional reasons.
- Good leaders rely on influence, not authority.
- Work/life balance is a series of personal choices.

With the accolades, however, comes the inevitable reality that we all face; namely, that it is very difficult to stay perched upon a pedestal for too long. Back at school the following week, paper continued to be shuffled across my desk and children continued to make child-like decisions seemingly unaware that they were being served by an outstanding team of educators and support staff. Yet, I was different, maybe imperceptibly so, but different none the less. The look on my daughter's face as my name was called at the gala dinner, said as much. Michael Fullan spoke of the importance of lateral capacity building and the strength of the crowd. As I stood side by side with the other award recipients, I was struck by the strength of our crowd and the value of such an experience.