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Revans: The Man and His Legacy

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Introduction

This chapter is a compendium of recollections and reflections especially written for this chapter by those who knew him well or who have closely studied his work. There are a number of perspectives included, and we feel that what emerges is a mosaic of Revans – his personality, values, core beliefs, and what constitutes his legacy.

When those who knew Reg describe his strengths, interests, and idiosyncrasies, there are a number of words that come to mind. They include *venerability, wisdom, perspicacity, tenacity, generosity, humility, kindness, grace, dynamism, inspirational qualities*, his tendency to be a *maverick, provocativeness, innovativeness, forthrightness, integrity, dignity, confrontational nature* at times, and *athleticism*. He could also be viewed as a *philosopher*.

Each commentary will begin with a few words about the person contributing the thoughts and their relationship to Reg.

Others, of course, have commented on Revans' legacy and about the person. For those readers who would like to see the sources of these published accounts and comments, please refer to Chapter 8 ("Action Learning Today: Resources, Networks, and Communities of Practice"). For other details, please see Chapter 6 ("Milestones in the History and Worldwide Evolution of Action Learning").

Glimpses of his personality and character (Robert L. Dilworth)

I have written this comment from my experiences with Reg, including information gleaned from dialogue with David Botham, Albert

Barker, Verna Willis, and others. I had regular contact with Reg beginning in 1991, and we became close colleagues and friends. Revans' last publication was a foreword he wrote for a book Verna J. Willis and I wrote on action learning: *Action Learning: Images and pathways*. Revans died in 2003.

Anonymous benevolence

In April 1995, in initiating the First Action Learning and Mutual Collaboration Congress at Heathrow, England, with many countries represented, Reg learned that the East European invitees were having difficulty funding their travel and accommodations. He quietly drew on his own meager financial resources to cover their expenses. This was typical of Revans. He was a man of action and did not make a point of calling attention to his personal acts of benevolence.

Spartan existence

Reg Revans was Spartan almost beyond measure. He consumed little food and, when he went to a restaurant, most of the serving went into a paper bag to be taken home. His refrigerator, especially after his second wife Nora died, could be described as a grotto of paper restaurant bags and other leftovers. Family and friends would periodically clean out the refrigerator to protect his health. Ideas, concepts and taking action fully occupied his time, and when he was performing research or writing, which it was virtually continuous, he could be as if in another world. He took almost no interest in money, material things, or creature comforts.

Significance of graffiti

Seeing graffiti on walls as he rode around London on a bus, Reg remarked "The graffiti is a result of youth searching for their personal identity and a means of expression." That was a reflection of his depth of insight and wisdom. He had many books in his personal library, and a number of them related to psychology. He was a student of human behavior.

As world traveler

When he traveled the world, he packed light. Clothes worn for travel were essentially the clothes he wore during the trip. He usually had a very small bag that he carried on the plane, and it was mostly filled with books and papers. For overnight trips, he might carry only a "thin" valise, and it would be so stuffed with books and papers that it looked more like a basketball than a valise.

Dealing with conflict

During a meeting in England in 1994 with 12 members of an international advisory counsel, including representatives from the United States, China, the United Kingdom, South Africa, India, Australia, and Romania, a harsh confrontation occurred between attendees. It became so loud and offensive that two women who were present left the room. Revans sat there passively throughout, not commenting one way or the other, but he was listening closely. After a while the “storm” quieted down, and a decision was made by the group to have each member report on their individual perspectives. Why did the confrontation occur, and how had each member contributed to it? It took two hours to go around the table. Many attendees humbly testified that they recognized that they had contributed to the melee. They also talked openly about what they thought had brought it on and apologized for their part in it.

When the round was finished, Revans was asked for his views. He broke out in a big smile and said, “There has been some bloody good learning taking place this evening. It’s getting late. I’m going to bed.” He realized that the evening had been, in the end, extremely constructive in bringing the group together, and every individual had obviously learned a great deal from the experience. Revans’ basic interest was in having people learn from and with each other. That had happened. He listened rather than intervened, wanting the group to guide its own learning. To him, the evening had been a great success.

Revans as Johnny Appleseed

He was like “Johnny Appleseed”. He would visit places around the world, inspire people, and then what he started would frequently blossom into something important. In 1996, he had six graduate students at Virginia Commonwealth University shadow him during a week-long visit to the institution as an action learning team. Initially, they treated Revans with awe, as if he were some form of “guru”. They would ask him questions as if he were the worldwide expert. He would immediately disclaim any special expertise or gift. When they asked him what he thought, he would invariably respond, “But what do you think? That is what is really important.”

During the week, he would spend some time with them in dialogue off to one side, always primed by questions. He suggested to them that they might want to attend a conference in Bologna, Italy the following month and give a presentation on action learning. The students had never worked together before, had only a rudimentary understanding of action learning, and most were struggling to cover college expenses.

However, the confidence shown in them by this 87-year-old Englishman inspired them. They decided to follow his recommendation, and after much belt tightening they came up with the money. They went to Bologna and gave a presentation that was favorably received. One of the students could only scrape together US\$300.00, not enough to cover the trip. She donated the money to the other five to help them meet expenses.

Reg had also recommended to the action learning team of students that they consider setting up an International Center for Action learning in Richmond, Virginia. A week after he returned to England they had done so, even to the extent of having business cards printed up. They then presented to the City Council of Richmond a proposal for forming action learning teams of students and parents to better understand and resolve issues confronting young adults. This was too far out of the ordinary for the City Counsel to grasp or support. The students then formed an alliance with the Department of Corrections and worked with a mixed gender action learning team of six "last chance paroles". These individuals had violated their parole twice and, if they did so a third time there would be no chance of further parole. The action learning format worked well and the Corrections people were surprised at the mature dialogue that developed within this team. One of the team members was able to escape his downward spiral and was later hired by the Department of Corrections to work with other last chance paroles.

The story does not end there. The action learning team of students remained active for two years. One of them, Donna Vick, was selected as the first Distinguished Revans' Scholar and given a fully paid scholarship to obtain a Ph.D. from the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research at the University of Salford in England when it was created in 1995. She completed her degree work and was able to join their faculty.

All of this sprang from the visit of an 87-year-old man who then proceeded to change the lives of the students involved. If Revans were alive today, he would almost certainly say, "I did not change them. They changed themselves." This is but one of many examples of Reg as Johnny Appleseed.

Children taking the lead

Reg was always intrigued by the harmony he could witness with children at play. They could operate much more harmoniously than adults, were spontaneous in their expressions, and felt secure exploring new

ideas. Why was this lost when those children were subjected to highly regimented classrooms that did not allow them full opportunity or space for using their God given intellectual powers?

Reg visited Melbourne, Australia and worked with the local police on problems affecting a large apartment complex in Melbourne that housed immigrants – the Carleton Estates. Thirty-five languages and dialects were spoken there. The various nationalities and ethnicities had congregated on given floors and there was territorialism, friction, and even active conflict between the groups. In the meantime, Reg observed that there was almost no conflict on the playground at the complex. Blacks, Whites, Asians and a representational sampling of all the different nationalities and ethnicities interacted comfortably.

The children ended up taking the lead in defusing the conflict. With money provided by the local police, they started a newsletter that covered events and other information across the ethnic fabric of the tenants. The children came up with the idea of having murals painted on each floor to depict the heritage of the people who lived there. This was accomplished, with the local police once again funding the project. As Reg had observed on seeing the graffiti in London, people need to display their identity, even as they search for it. Revans had been a quiet presence, gently asking questions as the process went forward, working with the local police officials and the children.

The frictions that had been in evidence calmed, with harmonious relations becoming the behavioral norm, founded on respect for one another. Eight years later, Reg returned to Carleton Estates. Had the changes brought lasting harmony? For all intents and purposes they had, and he left satisfied. Some more “apple seeds” had taken root and grown into robust trees. That was the most significant reward that Reg could receive. It far exceeded any titles or monetary award.

No computers allowed

Reg never joined the computer age. He refused to use a personal computer or a word processing program. His typewriter was not even electric. He handled a huge volume of correspondence and other writing the old fashioned way. When he made a mistake, he would dab white-out on it and then type over it. As he became older and his hands began to shake, much of the white out would end up on the typewriter keys rather than the paper. The keys would end up sticking together from all the white out droppings, and would not always print clearly. His friend Albert Barker would periodically clean the keys as well as he could.

I should be running them, laddie

When Reg visited George Washington University in Washington, DC in 1991, he found himself waiting for an elevator with his professor host. It did not come quickly and Reg lost patience. Noticing a stairwell, he said, "Let's walk." He caught the host off guard, and she ended up following his lead for the nine-floor climb. As they proceeded up the flights of stairs, Reg heard some students behind him remark – there was nothing wrong with his hearing – "Look at that poor old man climbing the stairs!" Reg turned around and said, "Right you are. I should be running them laddie" and, even though he was 84 at the time, he then proceeded to do so.

This would have been no great surprise to those who knew him. He had represented Great Britain in the 1928 Olympics. While at Cambridge University, he broke their record for the long jump, a record that was not broken for over 30 years. He was unusually fit and energetic for his years.

A human Rolodex

He had an unusual ability to recall numbers, addresses, and the names of people he had not seen for years. It was phenomenal. Numbers also fascinated him. On one occasion, when he had asked for a phone number to add to his "Rolodex", he started to laugh. When asked why he was laughing, he said the integers came together in an interesting way. And then he said, "Only a mathematician would understand the humor."

This is a good place to underscore his versatility and range of interests. He spoke Swedish (his first wife was Swedish) and German, and had a working familiarity with several other languages. He was a physicist, economist, educator, artist; furniture maker, musician, and more than a few would label him as a philosopher as well.

A daughter's view

What follows has been extracted with permission from remarks that Marina Blanc, Revans' eldest daughter, made on the occasion of the celebration of the 100th anniversary of her father's birth in 2007. The remarks were given at the Manchester School of Business at the University of Manchester.

His memory

When he was 92 years old, I took my father to Birkenhead [where he had lived in very early childhood] to see if he could find the house in which

the family had lived, and I was startled to realize what a phenomenal memory he still had. I drove in from the wrong road (for him), and he was somewhat concerned because he remembered the house being on the left, and all the left side houses had been razed to the ground. When we came to a cemetery gate, however, he recognized this as being opposite his front door. The old house was still there.

Love of music

From an early age, he developed a great affection for music and, as he was not able to sing, he would whistle everything. Here, his incredible memory served him well and he was able, from snip-its, to identify most symphonies and concertos, etc. We used to have bets as to what was on the radio when we were out driving. He always got the composer right, but sometimes could not name the composition. I did not stand a chance.

Fascination with nature

He grew to be fascinated by what happened in nature. His knowledge of British birds and trees was phenomenal. If he could not see a bird sitting conveniently on a branch, he could identify by its call, flight, or feathers. He recognized trees by their silhouettes if he was too far away to see the bark or pick a leaf.

Art

Apart from athletic endeavors, he developed an interest in art. He executed many paintings, cartoons, and even illustrated small books for children. He painted portraits, street scenes, and drew such a detailed black and white sketch of Emmanuel College that I had always thought it was a photograph. He had an enviable skill with a pencil, but also found time to play the trumpet. We all knew he could write books and articles on action learning, but how many of you knew that he also wrote poetry and plays? He was a man with many, many gifts, most of which he kept hidden.

Concern for those less well off

Reg would never stand on ceremony and, even when the King of Belgium gave a dinner in 1971 to honor Reg as a Chevalier (he was designated a knight), having eaten the starter, he refused the main course and turned his plate upside down. He protested that there were others who needed the food more than he did.

Focus on how people learn

He was fascinated with how people learn and was convinced that “hands on” learning was more valuable than “book learning” would ever be, both to the individual and to society. This did not keep him from reading, though. He was addicted to books. He read and collected books all his life.

Furniture maker

He made furniture, a large dining table from one plank of elm, on an oak chassis; a sofa frame that took a single bed base and served its time in both capacities; a sideboard – still with me, small tables, armchairs, one made from an acacia tree that fell in the garden.

Patient teacher, but with a ferocious temper at times

He was a patient teacher, but also had a ferocious temper and, when something went wrong, you escaped to your bedroom.

Tastes in foods

Reg’s preferred foods gave me concern: he loved cheese, cream, and butter, and used salt liberally; not for him the five fruit and vegetables a day. He had coffee with his sugar, ate chocolate biscuits by the tin-full, and his diet was enough to drive a cardiologist to a heart attack; yet, he reached the age of 95. He did love fish, so perhaps this compensated.

Religious beliefs

I never discussed religion with Reg. That he sent me to a Quaker School may have some bearing on his belief, but as we know from reading his papers, he knew the Bible very well indeed.

Love of walking

His love of walking continued throughout his life and, at Cambridge, he and Vivian Bowden [a fellow graduate student in physics] walked for miles together.

[A note from Albert Barker: During Reg’s final illness, shortly before he died, Reg learned that Vivian Bowden was near death at a nursing home just a couple of miles away. When Barker visited Revans one night, Reg told Albert to go cheer up Vivian. “He needs more support than I do.” Barker immediately went down the road to comfort Vivian, who was dead by morning.]

Declining health

In 1997, Reg began to feel the strain of a youthful injury. When he was an Olympic athlete, he had injured his left ankle. "It will be all right when it is mended, but when you are 80 it will give you some trouble", young Revans was told. Reg was lucky enough for the ankle to wait until he was 92 before it bothered him. It made walking difficult, and he finally began to slow down.

David Botham, Friend and Protégé of Revans

I knew Reg very well and spent one evening a week with Revans for 20 years, not to mention the interaction I had with him at other times in my role as the head of the Revans Center for Action Learning and Research, established in 1995.

Revans the maverick

Revans was a maverick in many respects; always testing the ground up ahead and willing to take on the established ways of thinking. He was a man ahead of his time and an early proponent of experiential learning, as opposed to didactic approaches to learning, such as a professor imparting knowledge to a passive audience of students. *For Revans, the way to learn was to grapple with real problems, with the participants learning from and with each other.*

The humanitarian

While Revans was a scientist, he was also a humanitarian and came to believe that action learning could be a force for bringing people together in open dialogue to solve the world's problems. He felt that real learning was a social process in which others need to engage.

The importance of fresh questions

It was consistently argued by Revans during the many presentations he gave during his lifetime that action learning centered on the posing of fresh questions. The posing of questions can be attributed to a Socratic idea (469–399 BC) intended for seeking new knowledge. Plato (427–347 BC) developed it into a method of philosophical training by means of questioning games. The games were later used by Aristotle (384–322 BC) as the first systematic epistemology and logical system in the Western tradition on which all hypothetical-deductive thinking was largely based.

Action learning as an autonomous learning process

One of the most challenging consequences of the Revans legacy is the relationship between action learning operating as an autonomous learning process for participants, and those charged with the task of organizing, sponsoring and advising action learning programs. Much debate has occurred over the nature and, sometimes, worth of such arrangements, which in general has led to polarity, with some favoring utter and complete autonomy for action learning sets so that only participants are allowed to learn from and with each other. Others strongly favor the inclusion of sponsors, advisors, consultants and facilitators (Garratt, 1983). Revans consistently, and sometimes angrily, spoke out against inclusion of people external to the set and strongly advocated for autonomy (see, for example, Revans [1984, pp. 209–20]).

He challenged all who offered their professional expertise as set advisors and/or facilitators. He found it particularly galling when people would suggest that they were admirers of his concepts and practicing them, when they were leaning heavily in the direction of having external “experts” constantly intervene in set deliberations and dialogue.

Emphasis on research

Another serious difference between the Revans approach and the majority of current trends in action learning lies in his strong belief and emphasis on research. Consequently, all of Revans’ action learning programs were systematically researched, largely by Revans himself as the very basis of his continuing scholarly contributions. It can be argued that Revans adopted a classic action learning stance in the sense that he introduced action learning programs in the major implementation phase in order to observe change and reactions to such a way of understanding organizational behavior (see, for example, Revans, 1971, pp. 148–201 and his descriptions of management education through action learning.)

How he related to action learning sets (teams)

Revans had a clear view of his own relationship with action learning teams. First, he anticipated that conscious learning would take place in the team that would be accessible. Second, he exercised grace and politeness, and waited to be invited to a team meeting rather than thrust himself on the participants, and he demonstrated a sobering level of humility around his own learning needs, thus avoiding the arrogance associated with the sole experience of subject knowledge.

Hesitancy to define action learning

Some suggested that Revans failed to offer, or avoided offering, a definition of action learning. They try to point out that the understanding of the process would have been easier if he had. However, the argument is not entirely valid. While Revans would profess to avoid defining action learning – preferring to explain it in terms of what it was not – Revans did, in fact, provide a definition which has been largely overlooked, if not completely ignored. He stated:

Action learning is a means of development, intellectual, emotional or physical that requires its subject, through responsible involvement in some complex and stressful problem, to achieve intended change sufficient to improve his observable behavior henceforth in the problem field. (Revans, 1979, p. 4)

Relevance of action learning to the here-and-now generation: The very heart of his legacy

Revans' work, like all legacies, is meaningless unless it has relevancy to the here-and-now generation. Therefore, there is still much more to be done to introduce Revans' approach to aspects and interpretations of action learning. For example, Reg's writings did not receive wide readership in the United States. Therefore, the specifics that had been addressed by Revans did not, for the most part, receive much serious review in America. The potential of action learning came to be appreciated from those portions of Revans' work that were picked up in the journals and the literature. There were also people who had worked with Revans that also helped to spread the word on his philosophy and conceptual thinking. But, over time, these rather narrow penetrations of thought related to action learning came to be further diluted.

You can encounter a rather wide spectrum of applications that are labeled as action learning but, when examined, they seem to have a limited relationship to what Revans had in mind. This is not to say that Revans had a rigid interpretation of what constituted action learning, because he did not. He recognized that it could be realized in different forms, but he became concerned when he saw tight control of the applications and little empowerment of those supposedly engaged in action learning.

For the reasons just highlighted, Revans' legacy does not usually find full expression. However, when his concepts are examined closely and related to the challenges that we face today in organizations and management, it becomes apparent that there are important lessons and

approaches that are as applicable today as when Reg first articulated them. He was one of the pioneers in stressing the advantages of small teams that are empowered. He referred to this as “small is dutiful”. We see this today in self-directed teams, leaderless teams, and in philosophies that emphasize closeness to customers and allowing workers that are in constant contact with customers to make decisions that can immediately satisfy customer needs. By returning to the roots of action learning, it should be possible to enhance the forms of action learning in use today.

Revans would often talk about little children and how easy it was for them to communicate openly with one another and explore the world about them. They felt safe talking to one another as they played together in small groups. Reg observed this willingness to disclose and be spontaneous, and how it could be driven out of them by what occurred in highly controlled classroom environments and in their workplace, where the authoritarian model might still largely hold sway. A genuine action learning experience – with the team empowered to range freely in its thinking in trying to better understand the problems at hand and how to solve them – could approximate the phenomenon so common with little children. It is a matter of being set free from the restrictions that can often confine thinking, engaging in open dialogue in an atmosphere of trust and mutual support, without someone looking over their shoulder, as can occur when external facilitators are present. This is the very essence of what Reg tried so hard to communicate, but his thinking was frequently rebuffed because it simply did not fit into the traditional mold of education and learning systems. To the extent that such true empowerment is practiced, it represents his legacy. It is the very essence of action learning.

Comments on Revans (Mike Pedler)

Mike Pedler is a leading academic and consultant on management and leadership issues. Widely published, he is the editor of *Action Learning Research and Practice* – the first international journal on action learning. Mike knew Reg and had worked with him.

A perspective on Revans and his legacy

I have said on many occasions over the past 30 years, although it is frustrating: Revans’ refusal to define action learning except in the negative, is actually a source of its longevity and its potential for reinvention. To him action learning is *not*:

Job rotation ... project work ... case studies, business games and other simulations ... group dynamics and other task free exercises ... business

consultancy and other expert mission ... operational research, industrial engineering, work study and related subjects ... simple common-sense. (Revans, 1998, pp. 89–103)

He could no doubt add a longish list of more recent but soon-to-be-dead techniques, but this is what maintains action learning's vitality. It is an idea, a philosophy, a discipline and also a method, but never just a method. We will always be asking the questions "What is action learning?" and "Am I doing it right?"

Another question that this prompts us to ask is "What are other people doing in the name of action learning?", and this question encourages us to share our practices and our accounts of our practices with one another in order to learn more. In a paper with John Burgoyne and Cheryl Brook, we ask, "What has action learning learned to become?" (Pedler et al., 2005), and note a number of recent practice developments that Revans either did not sanction, or actively campaigned against, such as the now widespread use of facilitators.

This is both worrying and reassuring: we have to continue to ask "Are we getting it right?", whilst experimenting with new forms and approaches – an apparent paradox that is part of the discipline and life-long learning.

The influence of Revans' religious or spiritual beliefs is another relevant question. I once drove him from Altrincham to Huddersfield, during which he more or less continuously quoted the Bible. He told me that his mother had read it to him as a child and that he remembered it, often word for word. Yet, he was mainly interested in the spirit behind the words. When he quoted Buddha on how to ease suffering it was because the principles of Buddhism were consistent with action learning.

More Calvinistic principles drove his famous (and sometimes infamous) moral judgments. He could resemble an Old Testament preacher when he scorned the latest gimcrack ideas in the management literature or railed against the "*canaille*" of the consulting profession. He was himself a consultant, but one who did not charge for his services, who did not necessarily seek out the powerful and was willing to spend his time with whoever was interested for the price of his "bus fare". If he were a consultant, this made him a rather unusual one.

My first encounter with him was at a meeting in the then Yorkshire Regional Management Centre in 1976, where he spoke about management and development in terms that few people present could relate to. He used there the famous questions from Belgium, "What is an honest man? and "What must I do to become one?", presenting management

development as a moral practice. We were developing people, seeking to influence their conduct and their direction. This did not seem to resonate with most of my colleagues, concerned – then and now – with teaching marketing or finance.

At the close of the day, Revans took books from a battered bag. “The publishers are not making a good job of selling these”, he said, “so anyone who wants one can have it for one pound sterling.” He sold two copies. My copy of *Developing Effective Managers* (1971), his most ambitious attempt to theorize about action learning, has been with me ever since, not least to mark a day on which I changed my direction.

Comments about the uniqueness of Revans (Alan Mumford)

Alan Mumford has long been associated with action learning. He was a Professor of Management at the International Management Centre (IMC) in the U.K. and has done much work with management development and action learning around the world. He is also the codesigner, with Peter Honey, of the learning style questionnaire (LSQ) based on David Kolb's research on learning styles. The following comments are taken from an interview with him in March, in London.

Uniqueness of Revans

Revans' uniqueness in first identifying, and then campaigning for, action learning is clear, and those managers who have gone through the process can testify to its attractiveness. His ideas are also now at least partially accepted by some of those institutions and academics he previously described as offering “an inexhaustible avalanche of lofty hokus-pocus”. Indeed, a leading member of the management education establishment claimed a few years ago that all business schools now use action learning.

A matter of charisma and presence

I went to the annual Conference of the Institute of Management... and there was Reg post-Belgium [Revans had spent an extended period in Belgium from 1965–1975, working on several projects – among them what came to be called the Belgian Experiment], doing his piece. I had read about him but I had never heard him before, and it was a most extraordinary experience. He had presence... and, like a number of people who have it, you cannot describe it. He just held it. He and I performed together on the same occasion, at a conference in Dubai, and actually it was the longest conversation I ever had with Reg. There he was talking to 80 or 90 what we call ‘Gulf Arabs’ – he did his hour piece

on action learning and he was wonderful, and they thought he was wonderful. Reg gave a brilliant delivery.

He absolutely squelched a very senior guy who really wanted to say “this is all a load of rubbish – anecdotal experienced people, people working on projects, what they need surely is what we all know managers need: A strong intellectually-based, knowledge based discipline, not bits of ...” and Reg stamped him into the ground, in the nicest possible way – another Reg experience.

Inveterate hankering of the tutor

All of us have favorite quotations from Revans. Mine is that action learning attacks “the inveterate hankering of the tutor to be the center of attention”. This struck me as being an elegant and important statement – just as true, incidentally, for people who describe themselves as facilitators as it is for stand-up lecturers. There is a certain irony involved because, of course, Reg was a superb speaker – but that is a role in which you are inevitably the center of attention.

Oration versus written communication

I was the ‘orator’ when Reg was awarded a doctorate [honorary] by the International Management Centre. I said there was a significant difference between Reg as a speaker, and Reg as a writer. As a speaker, I described Reg as being very clear in the construction of words and sentences, which was logical and entirely easy to follow. In contrast, his writing, although never difficult to understand, was as I described it “dense”. He came up to me after the ceremony. I was not sure what to expect. He was not at all a man given to easy flattery, so I did not expect the usual “Thank you so much Alan. A nice talk.” In fact, Reg seized on the point I had just made. He was interested to tell me how nice it was that someone should compliment him on his facility in both spoken and written communications. What he said was that I was the first person who had apparently noticed the significant difference in the two styles. He obviously approved of my comment – which was some relief to me, as I had not been at all sure he would appreciate the second part.

What Reg meant to me (Verna J. Willis)

Beginning in 1994, when Verna J. Willis met Reg Revans, she became deeply engaged in action learning. She ended up with a nationally recognized and award-winning program in human resource development (HRD), which employed action learning in a way that held closely to

the principles that Revans articulated. She had a chance to work with Revans, including a sabbatical at the Revans Centre for Action Learning and Research at the University of Salford in England. She ended up being involved with action learning in Australia, the Ivory Coast of Africa, Great Britain, and Romania. Willis was the first to use the term “Chief Learning Officer” (CLO), and one of her doctoral students, Gary May, was the first person to occupy a CLO position.

Like many others, I freely acknowledge that encountering Reg Revans and the way he thought and lived helped not only to reset and enhance the patterns of my professional life, but also to reassert my personal values inside and outside my work life. Six years previously, I had moved from corporate management of a training and development unit into a university faculty post purposely to create new employee development degree programs, and see if I could make a difference in the way organizations imagine and realize learning.

I had become thoroughly jaded by disappointing in-house learning events and the use of fairly standardized ‘learning technologies’ available in the marketplace. Most of the latter were copycat products that promised far more than they delivered, for few of them induced fruitful mindset alterations or behavioral changes. I kept wondering how to find or create something fresh, something real, something that truly engaged learners and made them responsible for what they learned and how they changed accordingly. They were far too easily gratified – lulled into doing nothing – by the clever stagecraft of legions of “stand-up trainers” who lived in our organization or were contracted from outside.

In 1993, I joined with like-minded faculty colleagues and a few senior corporate trainers in the U.S. to charter the Academy of Human Resource Development (AHRD). We believed that, in a formal alliance, we could strengthen our efforts, gain greater public understanding and acceptance of our emerging discipline, sharpen our teaching, and better support our students who were working out on the threshing floor of our new field.

Thus far, all of the above has been a prelude to what this story is really about: my energetic and deeply rewarding engagement with action learning. My introduction to Reg Revans and his expression of action learning occurred in 1994 in San Antonio, Texas, at the first official gathering of the new Academy. He had been invited there by colleagues (Dilworth, Dixon, and Marsick) who knew him and were confident of the importance of his contributions. It was fortuitous.

What Reg described sounded “right on” to me, affirming my thoughts about the dysfunctions of consultant-led “learning” that I had observed in microscopic detail in my seven-year corporate stint and my three years’ of overseas assignments in higher education. What was more important, of course, was his affirmation of what I deep-down knew, but had never found words to express: that people truly learn when they question what it is they think they know, unleash their curiosity, believe in themselves and their capacities, and internalize new findings and personal responsibility to act on those findings.

I believe nearly everyone senses this “freedom to learn” and act in Revans-style action learning, though it remains a frightening prospect for some. We recognize both of these reactions over and over in post-learning essays and oral debriefings. Action learning seems to be something we have longed for all our lives, perhaps having had glimpses of it earlier. (My glimpses occurred in a 1930s one-room schoolhouse, where learning with and from each other was perfectly ordinary, and definitely exciting.) Perhaps action learning seems most formidable if we have been conditioned to bow to “expert wisdom”, to depend heavily on authority figures to put us safely through our learning paces.

In retrospect, I believe that we, the highly professional, highly experienced founders of the new Academy – admitted or not – had few reliable answers, and were instead “partners in adversity” [a Revans term]. We were in the midst of a torrent of “complexifying” elements in our work, though we were dedicated to creating learning organizations. But very few of us became devotees of action learning at the time.

It is a simple truth that great power lies in learning humbly “with and from each other” [a frequent expression by Revans], but how we spread that truth is another matter. I left Reg’s keynote session thoroughly curious about what more I might learn from him and from those who valued what he stood for. The odd thing is that I recognized that what Reg gave voice to, I already agreed with, but I felt I had been given no permission to act upon it. I know mine is not an unusual case. Most of us probably do not know how much of this remains untapped.

Reg’s words enabled me to reinstate the knowledge that permission is an internal matter, not awarded by authorities of any kind. Shortly after, I became brave enough, with strategic intent and actions but no sponsorship, to launch action learning at a very conservative university. Within a handful of years, action learning at Georgia State became a touted conduit to and from the outside world of commerce,

government, and civil society, and our efforts to link up with the “real world” were accorded generous publicity.

I believe that Reg, by nature and upbringing, thought holistically. I am certain that that he was among the first of the great systems thinkers to embrace what Ervin Laszlo is now calling “a cosmology of wholeness” that does not view any part of life, society, earth, or universe as separate from any other part. One might alternatively call it “ecological thinking” on a grand scale, involving DNA, cells, particles, environments as well as “inner” and “outer” space. Reg was far in advance of authors like Margaret Wheatley and Peter Senge in applying general systems principles to institutions and business organizations, emphasizing the democratizing, humanizing aspects of such principles. He inhabited no ivory tower but, instead, engaged as strategist, tactician, and day laborer in pursuit of a more collaborative, more consciously interdependent world.

I think he deliberately avoided the jargon of the many disciplines he knew about, so as to find an oral language understandable to everyone from coconut- and oil-pressers to royalty. There is a touching story in one of his unpublished manuscripts that makes this perfectly clear. He walked out of a Washington, DC conference of the American Psychological Association at which, as I recall, he had himself been a presenter. Dismayed at the tedium, the surfeit of intellectualism and pontification he experienced there, he began to wonder about the city. He came upon an outdoor assemblage of people strangely dressed, “hippie-era people” who were happily engaged in singing, picnicking, and enjoying each others’ company. They welcomed him into their gathering, and he stayed on, singing gospel music with them. The contrast between the rule-driven precincts he had just left and the spontaneous welcome he had just received must, indeed, have been stark. It has been several years since I happened on this manuscript in the Revans Archives at Salford University, and I found the account so personal that I could not bring myself to copy it. Now I wish that I had. I have thought since that nothing ever gave me more insight into the man than his record of this incident. This is the same man, of course, that saw such suffering in England during the air attacks by Germany in World War II. In light of such indelible experiences, I suspect he frequently found difficulty aligning himself with people and events that were less real, arresting, or life changing.

Sifting through the dozens of adjectives and characterizations in a vain attempt to “crystallize” the Reg I knew for four short, intensive learning years, I have fallen back on one simple word. Reg was, and is,

an authentic *presence*. I would capitalize this word, except Reg would not himself have countenanced the emphasis. Yet, as I have noted above, Reg was, and is, a *vital presence* in my personal and professional life, a sort of culminating influence. Among other dispensations, he validated my own overarching, systems-oriented world view and helped me to realize how I could strike a better balance between trying to change the world and being changed by it.

This is the kind of presence Reg exemplified, no matter how sternly prophetic, informally witty, or reflectively silent he became, or how stubbornly he repeated his favorite themes. He was calmly alive and alert, “the actual person that is present, of a visible or concrete nature”, with “stately or distinguished bearing”, yet with a quality of poise and effectiveness that enables a performer to achieve a relationship with the “audience”. I mean all of these things and more. There was a steadiness about him, and a genuine openness to others that won human trust and confidence across the nations he visited. I also acknowledge that he was wary of pretentiousness, even when being an idiosyncratic presence was clearly a delight to him; it was also an ego burden for such an essentially humble man to carry. He quickly disposed of it by disclaiming his own uniqueness.

I am convinced that, beyond all his words, his presence is what Reg offered and still offers to those who have most closely followed his precepts and patterns of action learning. It is the presence of self that constitutes Reg’s legacy, embodying for all time his own life’s work, his mental and moral philosophy, his own seeking and sharing of what he found to be the world’s wisdom. He never stopped searching while I knew him, and I often wished – for my own edification – that I could make a list and read everything he valued enough to keep in his pared down library.

A notation made by R. L. Dilworth when Revans was briefly a scholar-in-residence at Virginia Commonwealth University reads: “Jan Brandt [one of Dilworth’s graduate students] in discussing the dynamics of their action learning experience [expressed an] analogy to Quaker culture and convention at meetings: [that one] ‘cannot ask questions they know the answer to.’” This is the only reference I have found to the influence of the Quaker meeting house rules on the importance of the “Q” [Questioning Insight] in Revans’ formula for learning. Raised in that faith, it is no wonder that Reg searched always for fresh questions, and never – to my knowledge – suggested that finding answers was anything more than a temporary resolution in a changing world that would drive learners forward to new questions. He found in other

faiths a similar emphasis on the importance of the mutuality of learning. Thus, a life of learning must forever be a quest, a process, and a dynamic existence. Such a dynamic forbids “idolization of past experience”, and locates action learning naturally in a community of reflective, questioning learners.

I recall one occasion when I felt Reg was excluded from the community, when others present gave no mind to what he wanted: a spirit of inquiry regarding texts to be found particularly provocative. I was on study in residence for two months at the Revans Centre. When Reg brought in a suitcase full of books in which he had marked the texts he would like to explore with us at the next staff meeting; I volunteered to copy, collate, and distribute these. I read them with interest and looked forward to making connections between them, action learning, and the work of the Centre. But somehow, when he came for the staff meeting, we never got around to his materials. I am not sure why, but suspect it was the immediacy of other issues. I was saddened because he felt that we needed new questions and that, in ignoring this, we blinded ourselves to Reg as a vital presence, forgetting his reason for being there.

Proponents and practitioners of action learning can easily fall into this pattern of exclusion of people and questions outside of their immediate concerns. This tendency, I believe, constantly poses the need for us to test the temper of action learning. Failure to acknowledge the “Reg presence” may have far reaching effects, over time, on his life legacy. If we are not vigilant, we may too often settle for being clever and not wise.

But, despite this warning, I see opportunities for expansion of Reg’s points of view and his faith in action learning. Contributors to this book testify to the widening use and variety of venues, as well as a renewed allegiance to the importance of every individual member in team (set) activity. Action learning is not – and never has been – “owned” solely by the profit-making sector that is most able to support it financially. It may be that the times are right for ever-broader reliance on action learning, as we face a catastrophic breakdown of human societies everywhere. We appear to be arriving at a greater enlightenment about our local-to-global responsibilities to one another, in our common humanity. I am particularly hopeful, since I have investigated how action learning is being used in nation-building and economic development, even in the poorest communities. Action learning has gone global, even as Reg predicted. His grass-roots realism – we hope – has begun to come of age.

A Summary: Proof of the power of action learning

We have just been through a variety of perspectives on Revans as a man and what constitutes his legacy. The most important proof of action learning can be gleaned from what those who have been through a true action learning experience say about it.

Verna Willis—in her action learning program at Georgia State University, and the same was true of the program created by Lex Dilworth at Virginia Commonwealth University—operated in very close alignment with Reg’s precepts, including minimal facilitator interventions in the process, letting the action learners learn by doing, in dealing with major problems being confronted by large organizations and companies, public and private outside the university. Problems addressed met Revans’ tests—they were highly complex, urgent to the companies owning the problem, and even falling in the category of being seen as insoluble. Action learners were thrown into the deep end of the pool, confronted with problems in which they had little or no expertise. Their associates were often unfamiliar to them, although they were also graduate students. As already mentioned, the problem was totally unfamiliar to most.

So what happened? Willis conducted a well-engineered analysis of the comments contained in the student essays using a software program to help in sifting through the reflections of the students as they completed the action learning experience—five weeks, in the case of Willis’s program. Some categories were entirely expected and even prompted, through critical incident type questions, such as when were you most engaged? and When were you most distanced? But other categories emerged that were not expected, such as “transformation”. It could be said various ways, such as “This experience has profoundly changed me.”

What follow are some verbatim comments by the students that related to transformation. They represent a “mirror” in terms of what happened when the Revans’ precepts were employed in a pure form. How do they match up with what Revans seemed to have in mind? To the extent they do match up, they can perhaps be seen as proof of principle and a reflection of Revans’ legacy in practice.

Student 1: Reflecting on the past five weeks, I realize this class has basically built an awareness in me. First, an awareness of the fundamentals of action learning, and secondly, an awareness of myself. The latter awareness opened my eyes to the way I now think of myself and group dynamics. It is actually a relief knowing that I don’t have to be the expert, but that I may call on my intuition, common sense, and creative

thinking that I feel are my strong points – those traits about myself that I did not put much “worth” into because I felt if I didn’t know everything there was to know about a subject, then I should squelch my ideas and keep my mouth shut. Now I know better! I also find it easier to deal with (problematic) others in a group situation. Whereas in the past I was intimidated by the very knowledgeable people, now I see them in a whole new light. If they were being cocky, I would hold back. Now I can assure myself that they aren’t so smart after all if they cannot open their minds to learning; sounds silly, but now I do not feel intimidated.

Student 2: What I gained after several weeks in this course is the realization that exploration of others and ourselves is what true learning represents. It is the exploration aspect of learning that I think gets ignored in most situations where a group of people come together. Action learning gave me new insights into just how “problems solving” oriented we have become in this society. The linear pathway straight to the solution bypasses the process of questioning, exploration, and reflection. The end result is we end up forfeiting the growth that could have been found in the interaction process of individuals working together. I have truly gained a new appreciation for the value of being open to questioning and exploration, while at the same time letting go of the requirement of being the expert who has to come up with a solution. Now I realize if a solution is needed in certain situations, one of the best ways to achieve it is through questioning and exploration.

Student 3: I would like to state that action learning has affected me in many ways. It definitely has not been just another learning theory added to my knowledge. In many ways, I have begun to view it more as a life philosophy that I could use in all areas of my life. It has helped me realize that it is OK to just question and reflect without having to come up with an answer right at the moment. I found that learning does come from openness and relinquishing the expert role. I also realized that when you question and explore, you are also able to drop many of the value judgments that you may normally place on individuals. That even though you might not agree with someone’s ideas, when you use action learning, you can still reflect on those ideas and ask fresh questions that could help expand your own awareness.

Revans’ legacy is very much alive, to the extent that practitioners heed what he had to say and practice it – not slavishly, for that is far removed from Reg’s intent – but by keeping it visible and adapting it to different contexts, venues and cultures.

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