



Two Dragons and an Elephant (on My Chest)

I look at the time on my phone: 2:46. What! I have only slept for one hour. I can hear my heart pounding in my head, the pulse at my temples throbbing. I put my hand on my chest, feeling the bounding apex. Ectopic beats! I feel like I have an elephant sitting on me. I can't breathe and there is a sharp pain behind my sternum. I went to bed last night with my thoughts racing. I could not sleep. I tried meditation. I tried focusing on my breath. I made a conscious decision not to take a sedative. I was curious where my mind would take me through the night.

As I lay there in a dazed state, I became aware of images unfolding. I was sitting astride a black dragon with smooth metallic looking skin, cool to the touch. This dragon was enormous, like the Water-Horse in the film, *The Water Horse: Legend of the Deep*¹. I could feel its immense power, yet it was calm, quiet, and confident in its strength. I became aware of another dragon, a red-and-orange beast, much smaller, fast, fierce and very dangerous. This dragon was flying around me with sharp spines and teeth. This dragon could harm me. I felt very vulnerable. What did it all mean?

How does this relate to my leadership journey?

In October 2011, I became the Director of the Centre for Palliative Care at Chris Hani Baragwanath Academic Hospital. I had experience practicing palliative medicine and I enjoyed teaching medical students the art of Palliative Care. But I was not sure of my skills or capabilities in leading a pioneering centre, especially when I was informed that our centre had been approved as an academic centre at the university. I felt that I was stepping into very big shoes, as the previous director had established the centre and achieved so much. Suddenly I was feeling woefully ill-equipped and somewhat overwhelmed. I had previously run an HIV clinic at a small district hospital, but this seemed like such a huge responsibility. I

was not sure if I would cope or if I was even the right person for this job, but I decided to push through the doubts, tackle my fears and make the best of it.

I learned of the Leadership Development Initiative (LDI) offered by the Institute for Palliative Medicine at San Diego Hospice. I recognised this as an incredible opportunity to develop sorely-needed skills in leadership. I was so grateful to be accepted as a participant and thoroughly enjoyed the first residential phase of LDI in February 2012.

I returned to South Africa full of new hope and aspirations. I continued to work on my own development as a leader as I got to know my team and started to understand the history of the centre. In addition to continuing to develop the centre as both a clinical and academic centre of excellence, my vision for the integration of palliative care into all levels of health care was beginning to take shape. I started to network with partners at the hospital and university but was soon finding myself more and more caught up in paperwork. The urgency of developing the academic centre became apparent as people showed an interest in studying Palliative Care, especially in Gauteng. I still felt overwhelmed at the enormity of the tasks ahead of me.

I had two projects: one, to extend Palliative Care services to primary healthcare and the community in Soweto, and two, to develop the academic centre. I knew that developing the academic centre would take time and would be a long-term project, but I naively thought that strengthening Palliative Care in Soweto was a realistic goal to achieve in two years. I planned my project and set out to put it into place when I hit my first obstacle. I could not set a foot inside any clinic doors until I had a letter of permission in my hand from the district director, even if I was the head of Palliative Care at “Bara” (as our hospital is affectionately known).

And so began the “delays” in my plans. Now I had a whole lot of additional work that I had not anticipated. While working on this project, I still had all my other responsibilities too -- teaching, academic presentations, clinical work and research.

I became involved in various smaller projects at the National Department of Health and with our National Palliative Care Association, as well as with APCA. I was passionate about developing a cancer pain management guideline for South Africa, which I started with a group of experts supported by Painsa. I was very busy trying to balance home and family life with work, but I was enjoying my work and I felt that I was coping with the support of those around me.

I had the help of a local coach, Edna Shushan, who was indispensable, and my LDI mentor Prof. Lukas Radbruch in Germany, as well as my local mentor, Prof. Ken Huddle. Prof. Huddle was very supportive, but also warned me not to take on too much and risk burnout. He advised that I focus on two objectives for a year. I would later realise the wisdom of his advice and regret not listening more closely.

At the LDI October residential course (2012) I was feeling quite tired and returned to work less rejuvenated and enthusiastic. My responsibilities and activities were becoming

burdensome, yet I somehow thought that I could manage everything. At the end of the year, I was approached to consider taking on the paediatric Palliative Care service in our hospital previously offered by an NGO which was closing. Part of my vision for the centre was that it would offer both adult and paediatric services and this seemed like an opportunity to bring the two together. I was concerned about the funding of the service, as the hospital was not able to offer further posts for Palliative Care. I agreed on condition that we receive funding for the service.

I started the New Year, 2013, learning how to write funding proposals, to prepare budgets, writing job descriptions and contracting new employees. Taking on the paediatric service was taking a lot more of my time than I had expected. I started to feel the stress of the administrative work, and I felt more pressured to succeed at everything and produce results. I was spending more time in my office at my desk sorting out problems, and less time seeing patients and teaching – which is my passion. I began to feel disconnected from my team. I started to lose touch with my vision.

Edna suggested that I set aside more time for clinical work as this is where I found meaning in my work. I began to support the paediatric team. Working with the children and their parents, I was becoming acutely aware of the painful inequalities and injustices in our health system and the growing plight of the poor in our country.

A year after I started on my project in Soweto, I was still negotiating with the health department and the district for support to implement primary Palliative Care in Soweto. However, I found the lack of interest, lack of ownership and lack of responsibility to be intolerable. I was supervising research, writing guidelines and assisting with academic issues. I found that I was working very hard -- long hours, worrying about how little time I had for my family and feeling that I was not achieving very much.

I was heading for the burnout I was warned about, but did not recognise the signs.

Work dominated my thoughts and my life. Physically, I was constantly tired, yet could only sleep three hours a night and started waking up with chest pains and a pounding heart. I began to lose all meaning and question the reason for being alive. I decided that I was done with Palliative Care and medicine. I felt traumatised. I realised I was in trouble and sought medical help. But this was not only a medical problem, it was an existential one too.

After a long period of recovery, I decided to try again but more slowly this time. I started picking up the frayed threads of my work. I felt like I needed to start over again, but this time with new insight, a clearer mind and a bit more knowledge. I decided to learn from my experience and stay sane.

I spent less time at the desk and more time seeing patients and teaching, making connections. Seeing patients did help me with the meaning of my work as I re-connected with the people who were benefitting from our endeavours. Despite the fact that the circumstances were unchanged, I reminded myself that while we had a very small service,

we were able to make a difference for those we touched and that we will do that to the best of our ability.

I reconnected with my team, spending more time with them, rather than in my office. This also gave meaning to my work. I had always been open to conversations with my team but had not spent a lot of time with them as a group. I realised as Dr. Henry Cloud says in his book, *Boundaries for Leaders*ⁱⁱ, I am “ridiculously in charge”. I am in charge of my team, of the centre, but most importantly of myself and how I respond to my environment -- and how much I allow myself to take on, given my own circumstances.

I realised that I had expected far too much of myself. I looked back at the mental workings of a mad woman. How could I ever have realistically expected to achieve what I was trying to do?

Prof. Huddle had been right. Set only two achievable (SMART) goals for the year, and do them well, rather than setting many and not achieving anything. Although it seems clichéd, the old adage is true, “Rome was not built in a day.” I had somehow expected to achieve incredibly long-term goals in a year or two. I was so caught up in the *doing* I forgot about the *being*.

Now I spend more time with my team and patients. I enjoy teaching and I have learned to say, “No.” Before agreeing to anything, I check what I will have to give up to take on a new task. I spend less time in the office and at the end of the workday, I leave, close the door and go home to my family.

I have learned to be patient and trust that the centre will develop one day at a time, one goal at a time, and one step at a time. I have formed partnerships in my goal to strengthen primary Palliative Care in Soweto. I have found a colleague to join me in growing our centre and our services. One day I will look back with my team and celebrate our achievements.

An Iron Man athlete gave me some good advice one day while I was cycling on the Braamfontein Spruit (river) trail near our home. Do not focus on the obstacles in front of you; you will be bound to come unstuck (as I did that day). Focus on the path ahead. I have reconnected with my vision for palliative care with renewed energy and greater wisdom.

The red dragon of my dream that night represents the circumstances I cannot control which appear to be overwhelming if I choose to let them be so. The black dragon is me. I am ridiculously in charge. I am powerful and I can make a difference. I need to be patient, and take each day as it comes remembering the balance in my life – to *be more* and *do less* of the “busyness”.

I no longer have an elephant sitting on my chest.

Lessons I learned on this bumpy but exhilarating ride:

Be myself; that is what I am best at. Do not measure myself against anyone else.

Know my style and what works for me and play to my strengths.

Engage with my team and learn to laugh.

Engage others to help form good partnerships to achieve more, synergistically.

When planning a project, do not assume anything over which I do not have direct control. (Liliana De Lima asked me a question at the first presentation of my project, about the co-operation of the specialists. I misunderstood her question at the time because of my lack of experience, but now I ask myself that question every time, "Who or what is pivotal to this project which is not under my control, and needs to be included in my planning?")

Set time aside for quiet contemplation for spiritual renewal, to listen to my inner compass and spiritual guide. If I lead from this place of knowing within, I will know the next steps.

Set only two objectives a year. Plan to do less but do it well. Thank you, Prof. Huddle, for all your support and wise advice.

Do not focus on the obstacles but rather on the path ahead.

Thank you too, to Prof. Lukas Radbruch, Edna Shushan, Dr. Shannon Moore, Ron Cameron-Lewis and all the other mentors and leaders on our course. Everyone has been an inspiration on this incredible journey. And my deepest thanks to my precious family without whose unstinting support and tolerance of my absences – both physical and mental -- I could never have come this far.

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ⁱ The Water Horse: Legend of the Deep. (2007) Directed by Jay Russell

ⁱⁱ Henry Cloud. Boundaries for Leaders: Results, relationships and being ridiculously in charge. 2013. Harper Business. New York