



A RADICAL VISION

LESSONS IN HOPE & LEADERSHIP

When I wrote *A Radical Heart* in 2019 and its sequel *A Radical Edge* in 2020, I wanted to offer a vision of a very different kind of leadership to that common in business and organisations today. I decided to do this by sharing glimpses of the life and leadership of Jasmin, an ordinary-extraordinary woman among the poor in the Philippines who has shaken my own life, outlook and work to the core. This 3rd piece tries to dig a bit deeper into understanding this remarkable person of faith.

By way of brief background, I spent most of my own life working with leaders and professionals in charities and international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), hoping to make a positive difference in the lives of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. I had worked hard and studied hard and have had the privilege of visiting and doing assignments in many different countries. Nevertheless, a personal encounter with Jasmin in 2016, for me, changed everything.

Jasmin is a true radical, by which I mean she consistently pushes hope and possibility to the limits. It can feel both profoundly inspiring and deeply disconcerting to work alongside someone with that spirit, energy and determination. I feel continually stretched, challenged and disorientated, a bit like someone struggling to find their feet on the wet sands of a beach, only to get swept away again by the next crashing wave. I am dazzled by her faith, hope and love. She may inspire you too.

CONTEXT

In reflective mood, I once asked Jasmin: “What fires your vision, her passion for the poor? Is it some deep ideological commitment that drives you to do it?” She looked back at me earnestly. “No, Nick. That’s you. That’s why you’re here.” Now more curious, I asked again, “So, why do you do it?” Her response took me aback. “Nick, I would love to enjoy the good things in life, to live without this daily struggle. Yet how could I live like that when so many people here are living in dire poverty?”

I felt speechless. Seeing the look on my face, she continued. "I know what it is to be poor. I have lived my entire life poor. It's a terrible curse that can leave people utterly without hope. I have known what it's like to be in desperate need, with no-one to help me. I will gladly give away my last centavo if it will save just one person from having to suffer what I've been through." This isn't just some worthy principle. It's what she does do. She concluded with, "I trust Jesus, and it's what he would do."

Jasmin has received help and knows the difference it can make. As a child, completely dispossessed of land or home, some Christians provided her poor family with a place of refuge. The neighbours were horrified and threw rubbish through their windows. "We don't want trash like you living around here." Mother Teresa of Calcutta visited and laid hands on her and prayed for her. In later years, a Christian organisation provided Jasmin with secondary education at a residential school.

On leaving school, Jasmin married early and, like many Filipinas, worked in a factory. It was long hours and, one day, she damaged some machinery. Instead of disciplining her, the Japanese manager took her under his wing, paid for the damage personally and helped to support her and her husband financially. He was an amazing role model, sharing his own earnings out among workers on the shop floor to help improve their lives. Such people have had a powerful influence in Jasmin's life.

Jasmin's own example, her willingness to seize the initiative and often at significant personal cost, has inspired countless people to take action too. It's a transformational style of leadership built on extraordinary vision, deep empathy and relentless determination. She prays hard, takes a breath-taking leap of faith and, at times, discovers others feel invited or inspired to join her. If no-one follows, she leaps anyway, trusting that God will enable her to do what she needs and feels called to do.

PERSONAL

Having heard of Jasmin's work with the poor, a secular charitable organisation asked if they could get involved. After all, with their backing, imagine the scale and scope of programmes she could run for the poor. Jasmin's response was (to a Western business mind, surprising) politely to decline. She explained graciously: "This isn't about a programme or a project. It's about a sacred encounter with every person, family or community. It's about bringing Jesus' love and hope to the poor."

In one such encounter, Jasmin noticed some people living at the roadside, not far from the university for the poor where she's now a student. They were sleeping in tiny, makeshift wooden shacks or sheltering under tarpaulins to help protect them from the rain, dust and fumes from traffic. She walked over to introduce herself and say hello. At first, they were surprised and suspicious: "Nobody sees us – it's as if we don't exist – unless it's the police wanting to move us on." Jasmin saw them.

Over time, she won their trust. These people lived at subsistence level, earning barely enough to survive. A family mentioned they yearned to have their baby baptized but felt too embarrassed to enter a church dressed in rags. Jasmin spoke with the local priest, bought the family new clothes and paid for a reception meal with her own money. They were delighted. "To be honest, we don't know much about the Bible or about Jesus, but we will never forget what you did for us today."

One family lived in what looked, to me, like a large rabbit hutch. One day they showed me proudly how they, all 7 of them, fit inside it at night to sleep. They crept in carefully through the tiny doorway, one at a time, and arranged themselves neatly in something akin to a complex jigsaw formation. I loved their sense of humour, entertaining this strange foreigner and laughing as they did it. It reflected Jasmin's own zany, humour and spirit. I've never met anyone so animated and playful.

As Christmas approached, Jasmin asked that same street community if they would like to have a Christmas party. A young boy jumped up and down excitedly, “Yes!” – and then asked, absolutely intrigued, “What’s a Christmas party?” When Jasmin told me this, I almost cried. The poorest of the poor have no disposable income. Most have never received a gift. I tried to imagine what that must feel like, to live so close to the edge all of the time. So powerless and so vulnerable.

Jasmin inspired others to get involved and convinced the university to allow her to use a room for free. As the event approached, she explained, “These children live in rags. I want to buy a good quality, black T-shirt for every person in that community with a white cross on the back, like my Christian biker friends wear in the UK, and a message on the front that says, ‘Jesus loves me.’ I want them to know that they are valued and they are loved.” She prayed and, somehow, it all happened.

The party was a great success. The children had lots of fun and every family went home with a nutritious food parcel. One of the most moving and striking things for me about this encounter was that, for some time afterwards, the young children from this unseen roadside community were now seen everywhere: playing outside, wandering in the marketplace and walking to school, proudly wearing their new T-shirts. It was a powerful, visual symbol of Jesus walking among the poor.

MOMENTS

A couple of months later, Jasmin learned that the local authorities had appeared with bulldozers, out of the blue, and cleared the roadside camp completely. The people had been forced to disperse, without warning, and Jasmin never saw any of them again. I felt devastated. Jasmin, however, was surprisingly more philosophical. “Nick, this is how it is for the poor. At least for one brief moment in their lives, they knew how it feels to be loved.” I knew she was right, and this time I did cry.

I've noticed this as a recurring theme in Jasmin's outlook and approach. In wealthier countries, we are used to living with high degrees of security. We tend to focus on the future, plan for and build towards it. In the poorer countries, people have no such security. Jasmin focuses intensely on the person in the present, to imbue her or his life with love and meaning. It's as if she's saying, "How can I make this moment, this encounter, this relationship, as life-giving and hope-inspiring as possible?"

Yet here's a paradox. Jasmin is equally intensely future-orientated. She yearns for a day when the poor and vulnerable in the world no longer struggle under such grinding poverty or the insidious effects of corruption. She sees the answer as salvation through a living relationship with Jesus – not simply, although profoundly – as an end-times heavenly event, but like Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*, as a fundamental transformation of human values and societies here-and-now.

Jasmin is inspired vividly by a Person, a vision and a hope in the future that has the potential to transform every-one and every-thing now. This transformation both reflects and contributes to creating the future she hopes for. I've often heard Jasmin declare to her peers and students: "You are the hope of the nation!" It's an evocative and provocative call. Change happens when people pray, act and live out ethical values with integrity. Jasmin walks the talk by role-modelling it first.

INSIGHT

In Jasmin's school days, when she was 14, she decided to write a letter to the President. It turned out to be a sophisticated commentary, analysis and critique of the Philippines' political, economic and social structures, along with recommendations on how to build a more ethical and sustainable nation in the future. Her teacher was amazed by this young girl. Where did this insight come from? With her permission, he contacted the press and her letter was published in a national newspaper.

In later years, Jasmin was caught off-guard for an impromptu interview at university, with whom she thought at the time were a couple of media students. They asked her to comment on the country's political situation and progress and so she did so, directly, into the camera. That night, she was contacted by numerous tutors and fellow students to congratulate her on appearing on national TV, and for speaking out so clearly and courageously. It turns out the 'students' were actual TV journalists.

Jasmin is invited, from time to time, to speak at various universities and community groups and was interviewed last year by an international network to share her experiences, insights and ideas. She's often reluctant to take up these opportunities, preferring to stay out of the limelight and to point people towards Jesus. I'm intrigued by this poor woman who grew up in a small wooden hut on a jungle mountainside. "I didn't read books. I worked – or I wrote on banana leaves with a stick."

I studied theology at degree-level, yet Jasmin has far greater spiritual wisdom. I have a masters' degree, yet Jasmin left school at 17. I have worked in international development, yet Jasmin has lived only in a jungle and 'slums'. I have travelled all over the world, yet Jasmin has stayed in the Philippines. I'm a qualified psychological coach, yet Jasmin has a deep grasp of leadership, people and change. She has become my mentor, rather than vice-versa. How can this be?

I don't know for sure, but I do have a hypothesis. Once, in the Bible, 2 followers of Jesus were put on trial for their faith. The accusing authorities were surprised by how much these men knew and understood. The narrator recorded a mysterious and intriguing observation: "When they (the authorities) saw the courage of Peter and John (the people on trial) and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that *these men had been with Jesus.*" I wonder.

Jasmin loves Jesus. She spends significant amounts of time in prayer with him. Every time she takes a leap of faith, she does so with him. She puts her life on the line time and again and that's how she learns and discovers his power, both to perform miracles and to save her in every way possible. "No matter what we think or do, we should always acknowledge and allow God to be a part of our plans. If we simply ask for his presence with us, he will make the impossible possible. He is our hope."

CHANGE

I've had the privilege of knowing Jasmin, of witnessing her life and leadership, for 4 years now. She sees herself as nothing, as an insignificant woman among the poor in the Philippines. She once said, "I didn't see myself until you saw me." The reverse is certainly true. Once I had seen how Jasmin lives and works – her faith, hope and love in action – my own life and work could never be the same again. She's a catalyst for change for everyone who experiences a sacred encounter with her.

Jasmin's life speaks a message of deep hope: "No matter who you are or what you have done, you really matter to God." Her radical call could transform everyone and everything: "Whatever status or power you have, use it for those who are vulnerable; whatever money you have, use it for the poor; whatever strength you have, use it for the weak; whatever hope you have, use to bring hope to those who live without hope. Speak up for justice and truth – whatever the cost. Pray."



NICK WRIGHT

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Nick is a follower of Jesus and is passionate about improving the lives of people and communities who are poorest and most vulnerable in the world. If you would like to learn more about Nick and his work:

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[Copies of previous articles, A Radical Heart - Lessons in Love & Leadership, and A Radical Edge - Lessons in Faith & Leadership, are available free from Nick Wright]