

The idea

Two years ago I had what some might call a brainstorm. As with most storms, winds howl, rain pours and energy far exceeds visibility. Once the storm passes, the winds subside, the rain stops, and the air clears. Visibility improves.

Such was my experience with this brainstorm. When the storm passed I was left with a pesky vision. I was skeptical of my own thinking, remembering the observation of Peter Drucker that ideas born from brainstorms are the least reliable sources of innovation.¹ I was encouraged, however, realizing the vision was not an innovation, really. It was just an idea, one that wouldn't leave.

What I saw in my mind's eye were several conversational gatherings, each comprised of about a dozen people. Participants were those who don't normally talk to each other, partly because they live along parallel lines that seldom cross, and partly because they may not know what to say to each other, how to say it, or even what questions to ask. Half the participants are theologically educated or educating. The other half are experienced innovators, entrepreneurs, economists and technologists, open to theological inquiry.

The gatherings were low profile, at least in my imagination; not a lot of promotion or glossy marketing brochures; just substantive conversations—lively, exploratory, engaging. Both halves of the room were having a lot of fun; serious, to be sure, but laughing a lot. Participants were having so much fun uncovering practical insights they decided to keep meeting, again and again.

Each participant was finding nourishment, encouragement, even inspiration from the others. It fed them all, intellectually and spiritually. The theologically educated found themselves delightfully engaged in a wider field of view than they had experienced before. The innovators found themselves encouraged, emboldened with deeper confidence, leaving each gathering with a greater clarity as to where innovations are needed and why. After a while, a common vocabulary began to emerge, not about doctrine or theology, really. More about value, hope and faith, and even, dare I say it, love and justice.

I envisioned initial conversations in a few disparate parts of the country, like the Silicon Valley, Route 128 outside of Boston, Chicago, Seattle and even Vancouver. I imagined them in a vacant classroom, one with a pristine whiteboard, which by the end of each conversation would be totally filled with lines drawn between boxes and circles cryptically labeled. There might even be a few equations. Before leaving most everyone pulled out their iPhones to capture for themselves the images left on the whiteboard.

In my mind's eye, initial gatherings lasted for only a couple of hours. Soon, however, some would stretch into the evening or take up a whole day. Regardless of the time, participants

¹ Drucker, Peter. *Innovation and Entrepreneurship: Practice and Principles*. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., 1985), p. 130f.

in these gatherings wanted to continue, as each conversation generated an energy and momentum all its own.

That's the idea that stuck after the storm in my brain blew through.

In the immediate aftermath of this brainstorm I thought the leftover vision a bit fanciful, like a daydream. The only problem was that this one didn't go away. It hung around for several weeks.

In hindsight, its stickiness in my head is understandable. From 1978 to 1982 I served congregations as an ordained Presbyterian minister. Since then I have worked as a consulting facilitator to large commercial corporations attempting to invent and innovate. Some refer to me as an innovation midwife.² Regardless of the label, I have had the rare privilege of living and working between two domains that seldom interact: theology and innovation.³ These two parallel domains, rarely touch, listen or speak to each other, at least publically. The lack of interaction is not really surprising, at least from a conventional perspective.

From a theological perspective, however, I sense both omission and opportunity, since both theology and innovation

- have much to say about responding to change,
- have to do with value and value creation,
- are ways people attempt to make sense, and
- shape human culture with positive or negative implications.⁴

Not knowing what to do with this pesky idea, I did what seemed like the obvious thing to do. I registered the domain name: innovationtheology.org. It didn't escape my notice that .net and .com were available also. I thought that would take care of it and I could go on to other things. Even such a small act as registering the domain name, however, seemed to make the vision stick even more. So, I gave into it, which was when I realized the vision had a gaping hole in it. Suppose these gatherings *did* occur.⁵ What on earth would those gathered talk with each other about?

An attempt to offer a preliminary answer is in a collection of essays under the title *Innovating in the Company of God: For a Biblical Theology of Innovation and Entrepreneurship*. The essays are intended as starters for conversations aimed at developing innovation theology. Summaries of these essays can be found in the Content Selection Brief.

² Vincent, Lanny. "Innovation Midwives: Sustaining Innovation Streams in Established Companies." *Research•Technology Management*, January-February, 2005.

³ On the innovation side, mostly with STEM-intensive innovating efforts (STEM = Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) of commercial corporations; on the theology side, mostly in the context of a Reformed theological tradition as an active Presbyterian layperson.

⁴ Such implications are often long-lasting on both creatures and the creation.

⁵ See www.innovationtheology.org for current status of these gatherings and conversations.