

STERLING WELLES CARROLL · CLEARFIELD ADVISORY

How I came to see what I see.

There is a line in Ecclesiastes that has organized my thinking for as long as I can remember: there is nothing new under the sun. It is not a counsel of despair. It is a structural observation. Foundations do not change. What sits on top of them does — and the people who mistake the surface for the structure will be surprised, every time, when the foundation asserts itself.

I have spent the better part of my life being the person in the room who could see the foundation. Not because I am particularly intelligent — I am not the smartest person in most rooms, and I have never been interested in being so — but because the surface, the conventional view, the consensus reading of a situation, has simply never been where my attention goes. I see what everyone else sees. I find it uninteresting. Underneath it is where the real thing lives.

I have never been trying to be an outsider. It is just how I see things.

The hut in the Philippines.

The origin of everything Clearfield Advisory does is not a consulting engagement or a business school framework. It is a classroom — a hut, really — in the Philippines, where I went as a missionary to the deaf.

The institutional response to that work was immediate and consistent: skepticism, dismissal, the quiet certainty of leadership that this was a lost cause. The deaf, in that culture, were considered categorically limited. They could not speak. When they did, they sounded different. The conclusion the hearing world had drawn was obvious and, to everyone around me, unquestionable.

What I saw was something else entirely. Being deaf does not diminish a mind. It organizes it differently. The brain, deprived of one channel, develops others with unusual depth. The deaf students I worked with were not cognitively limited. They were structurally misunderstood — and the institutions around them had built their entire response on the wrong diagnosis.

The chess insight came to me on a highway — the kind of unbidden clarity that arrives when you have been holding a problem long enough. My first thought was: *that's crazy. No one is teaching chess on the Christian mission field.* I know that was true because I investigated it

more thoroughly than the idea probably warranted. But what I knew about chess — what I had always known — was that it is tangible, immediate, and unforgiving in the best possible way. It makes the cost of thinking poorly visible in real time. And it requires no language.

*Chess forces cognition into the body. It makes thinking visible.
And it does not care whether you can hear.*

In the Philippines, chess carries cultural weight — it is considered an IQ test, which it is not, but the perception matters. When I began teaching the deaf students to play, something happened that no speech, no sermon, and no behavioral intervention had produced.

Hearing parents and adults began gathering around the hut to watch. One afternoon, a man who had been observing with particular curiosity agreed to play one of my students — a young man named John-Mark. Quietly smart, chronically underestimated, carrying the weight of a culture that had decided he was less.

John-Mark won.

The hearing man left the way people leave when a certainty has been removed from them. The deaf students understood exactly what had happened. For the first time, they had **concrete, visible, undeniable evidence** that they were not what their world had told them they were.

Some of those students are now chefs. Business owners. People who built lives that the conditions of their childhood had made structurally unavailable to them — until the structure changed.

No amount of speeches could have produced that. The government of the Philippines eventually made chess a formal part of the national school curriculum. I can still see the teacher of the deaf rushing toward me, waving the official notice, saying it was the first time the deaf had ever been ahead of the hearing in anything.

The institutional leadership, for its part, ignored it. Not because they were cruel, but because their framework had no category for what had just happened. When a frame cannot absorb a result, it does not update. It protects itself.

I had watched, for the first time in a professional context, what I would later come to understand as an Orientation fault. The leadership saw the work through a frame that had already decided what was possible. The result was invisible to them — not because they lacked intelligence, but because the structure of their thinking made it so.

What the corporate world confirmed.

When I moved from the mission field into the professional world — through web development in the earliest days of the commercial internet, through organizational work, through a decade inside an institution that told me quarterly that I was the most intelligent person they had encountered and then let me go when I asked them to fix the roof — I kept seeing the same thing.

Not the same industry. Not the same people. The same *structure*.

Organizations in transition reaching for behavioral explanations — coaching, culture programs, communication workshops — for problems that lived one level deeper. Leaders misattributing structural friction to personnel. Teams executing against competing frames without knowing the frames differed. People with formal authority who had quietly stopped acting on it, and no one in the organization had a language for why.

In the internet years, I watched organizations treat a new technology as a panacea — a solution to every marketing and connection problem ever conceived — because their Orientation had no frame for what the web actually was and was not designed to do. I attempted, repeatedly, to offer the structural reading. I was placed in the marketing department under a graphic designer and asked to explain the internet to people who did not want the explanation.

The pattern was not new. It was the Philippines, translated.

I kept seeing the concrete foundation the building sat on. I could never get anyone to see anything but the accoutrements.

The framework that was already there.

Clearfield Advisory did not emerge from a consulting methodology or a business school framework. It emerged from the accumulation of a lifetime of seeing structural fault lines that the people around them were attributing to something else.

The due diligence was extensive — it always is, for me, with ideas that feel true. Brain science. The neuroscience of decision-making. The work of Iain McGilchrist on the divided brain and what Western institutions lose when they privilege administration and categorization over the capacity to see wholes. The evidence base for why behavioral interventions produce temporary results when structural conditions remain unaddressed.

What I found was not a new idea. It was evidence for something I had already seen. The AORTA framework — Authority, Orientation, Risk, Temporality, Agency — is not an invention. It is a map of the fault lines that were already there, in every organization I had ever been inside, waiting to be named.

ResilienceForge, and the use of chess as a development instrument, is not a product. It is the direct continuation of what I discovered in that hut in the Philippines: that chess forces cognition into the body in a way that survives stress, that it makes the cost of poor thinking immediately visible, and that it produces genuine cognitive transfer in ways that classroom instruction and behavioral coaching reliably do not.

Why this, why now.

I am sixty-one years old in chronological time. I do not experience myself that way. What I experience is the accumulated clarity of a lifetime of looking at the level of things that most frameworks are not designed to reach — and finally having built the instrument to do something useful with it.

Clearfield Advisory exists because I finally understood that what I had been seeing my entire life was not idiosyncratic.

| *It was real and true.*

The organizations that come to Clearfield are not failing because their people are inadequate. They are failing because the structure in which those people are being asked to operate has developed fault lines that behavioral intervention cannot reach. The people are adapting to a broken architecture. The architecture is the problem.

I have been seeing that since a highway in New York, since a hut in the Philippines, since a young man named John-Mark beat a hearing adult at chess and a culture had to reconsider what it thought it knew.

The work has always been the same. Now it has a name.

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