

THE
EBOR
LECTURES



The Very Revd. Prof. Martyn Percy

Thursday May 7th 2015

*Not Joining the Dots: Education as Love, Life
and Liberty*



Not Joining the Dots: Education as Love, Life and Liberty

It was said of a new Dean of Yale, some years ago, that he was invited to speak at a banquet to close an academic conference at an English University. He rose, and said “as you know, I am from Yale, and I want to base my speech around those four letters”. His listeners looked hopeful, and he began. “Now, ‘Y’ is for youth in our society...” – and he proceeded to speak for twenty minutes about youth. “‘A’ is for ambition”, he continued, “one of the great drivers of change in our world” – and spoke for a further twenty minutes. “‘L’ is for learning” – and another twenty minutes passed, before finally ending with another twenty minutes on ‘E’ for education. He finished and sat down, clearly pleased with his mnemonic, and turned to his English host. “How did I do?”, he asked. “Oh, just fine”, came the reply, “but we are all so glad you did not come from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology”.

Well, this this is not a long lecture, and nor does it have a mnemonic. . (Especially when the proverbial swing-ometer and a late night with election news beckons). But I do want to talk about the point of education. More specifically, I want to argue that it is not just about training and educating individuals for making useful contributions to economic outcomes. Education also *forms* individuals – and shapes their lives for and in society – making contributions to every spectrum of life. Education is about character, conduct and citizenship. A real education shapes us for virtue and wisdom. So our best education may not be about helping students to ‘join-the-dots’, so to speak. I am of course mindful that if you are building bridges, you do want precision and accuracy. So sometimes, ‘tick-ing the box’ is exactly right, because there is only one right answer. But a lot of education is also about forming minds and hearts. And it is also about getting our students to think independently. Not to tick the box, so much as to think outside the box.

This can be illustrated with a nice story concerning a question in a physics degree exam at the University of Copenhagen: ‘Describe how to determine the height of a skyscraper using a barometer.’ One student replied: ‘You tie a long piece of string to the neck of the barometer, then lower the barometer from the roof of the skyscraper to the ground. The length of the string plus the length of the barometer will equal the height of the building.’ This highly original answer so incensed the examiner that the student was summarily failed. He appealed on the grounds that his answer was indisputably correct, and the university appointed an independent examiner to deliberate. The examiner judged that the answer was indeed correct; but did not display any noticeable knowledge of physics.



To resolve the problem, it was decided to call the student in for a viva and allow him five minutes to provide a verbal answer, which showed at least a minimal familiarity with the basic principles of physics. For four minutes the student sat in silence. The examiner reminded him that time was running out, to which the student replied that he had several extremely relevant answers, but couldn't make up his mind which to use. On being advised to get a move on, the student replied as follows:

'You could take the barometer up to the roof of the skyscraper, drop it over the edge, and measure the time it takes to reach the ground. The height of the building can then be worked out from a standard mathematical formula. (But bad luck on the barometer). Or, if the sun is shining you could measure the height of the barometer, then set it on end and measure its shadow. Then you measure the length of the skyscraper's shadow, and thereafter it is a simple matter of proportional arithmetic. But if you wanted to be highly scientific about it, you could tie a short piece of string to the barometer and swing it like a pendulum, first at ground level and then on the roof of the skyscraper. The height is worked out by the difference in the gravitational restoring force. Or if the skyscraper has an outside emergency staircase, simply walk up it and mark off the height of the skyscraper in barometer lengths, then add them up. If you merely wanted to be boringly, you could use the barometer to measure the air pressure on the roof of the skyscraper and on the ground, convert the difference in millibars into feet to give the height of the building.

But since we are constantly being exhorted to exercise independence of mind and originality of thought, undoubtedly the best way would be to knock on the janitor's door and say to him "If you would like a nice new barometer, I will give you this one – if you tell me the height of this skyscraper". And although the story is almost certainly apocryphal, there is a rumour that the student later won the Nobel Prize.

'Do not go where the path may lead, go instead where there is no path and leave a trail', would seem to be the right maxim here. Even John Henry Newman knew the value of constructive dissent, and that was to be valued over destructive consent: '[The] process of training by which the intellect, instead of being formed or sacrificed to some particular or accidental purpose . . . is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own proper object, and for its own highest culture' (John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University*, 1899, Discourse VII).

Some of you may know of the *Pie of Knowledge*. It is an attempt to describe your knowledge of things in relation to all the knowledge, in the universe by making a pie chart, and cutting it into sections. The first slice of this Pie of Knowledge is made up of those things that you know you know (so, for example, this might be the plot of King Lear, the name of your cat, or how to make the tea). Then there are the things you know you don't

know (this may be a larger slice, and may include the finer points of brain surgery, the mating rituals of the firefly, the names of all the stars, or the offside rule in football). The third slice contains things you know but have forgotten (e.g., the name of your cat, your grandchild's mobile phone number, or what's happening later...). The fourth slice of the pie is the things you don't know you don't know (I can't give you examples here because that would mean I knew).

The last slice is the things you think you know but really don't – your family or friends might be better able to identify these for you (e.g., Clifford Geertz's theory of local culture, why my neighbour is like she is, what this lecture is about, and what it was like to have been in a concentration camp). Now, which, I wonder would your biggest slice of the pie be? The things you know you know, the things you know you don't know, the things you know but have forgotten, the things you don't know you don't know or the things you think you know but really don't?

Well, let me help you. For all human beings the largest slice will be the things you don't know you don't know. This slice probably makes up 99.9% of the pie for most of us. The total knowledge of our universe is so vast that the sum of all human knowledge is infinitesimally small by comparison. So education is not all about acquiring knowledge. It cannot be, as Mr Gradgrind has it in Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, all 'facts, nothing else, and root our everything else...stick to facts'! Education is not just about the acquisition of knowledge. It is also what we do with it. And also, what we let it do with us. In that sense, it is a profoundly spiritual dynamic. It is not only what truth we possess, but what truth in the end possesses us. And does this truth set us free to serve our neighbour, community and wider world?

One of the great educationalists of the twentieth century was Paulo Freire – a writer on learning, life and liberty that was possibly only surpassed by John Dewey, to whom we shall introduce later. Freire was Brazilian educator and philosopher who was a leading advocate of critical pedagogy. He is best known for his influential work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1973), which is considered one of the foundational texts of the critical pedagogy movement.

One of Paulo Freire's aims was to help people achieve 'deep literacy' – to be aware of the far from innocent forces which can shape lives and institutions. Freire argued that deep literacy came through dialogue. It is in conversation and reflection that we become aware of how we are *determined* by our cultural inheritance. Moving beyond that can be achieved if we are willing to critically question what we think we know. Harvey Cox, in his book *On Not leaving it to the Snake* (London, SCM, 1968, p. xiv) says that the first sin is not disobedience, but rather sloth and indifference – 'we have not defied [God] so courageously – we fritter away our destiny by letting some snake tell us what to do'. Freire distinguishes between the types of questions or observations that are made in the

church: (1) Naïve – that maintain the status quo; (2) Shrewd – that challenges (but also maintains) the status quo; and (3) Revolutionary – which alter the status quo (*Pedagogy of Freedom*, 1998, pp. 51ff).

Clearly, and pedagogically, education is, properly speaking ‘revolutionary’; it should change the way we look at the world (or a topic). The art of this lies in ‘problem-posing’ strategies; acknowledging that knowledge or history is not ‘neutral’; and that education is part of the pursuit of freedom (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1973). In other words, knowledge is not simply material to be ‘banked’; it is, rather, to be discovered: ‘liberation education consists in acts of cognition, not (merely) transferrals of information...’ (A M. Freire & D. Macedo, *The Paulo Freire Reader*, 2001, p. 73). Freire, in his attack on the (supposed) neutrality of education, calls for a pedagogy of asking questions:

‘Students [should be] engaged in a continuing process of education [that] should be adept at asking questions about themselves...when someone loses the capacity to be surprised, they sink into bureaucratisation...Bureaucratisation, however, means adaptation with the minimum of risk, with no surprises, without asking questions. And so we have a pedagogy of answers, which is a pedagogy of adaptation, not a pedagogy of creativity. It does not encourage people to take the risk of inventing or re-inventing...’ (2001, p. 337)

Freire continues:

‘I would want to stress that education as it is consists generally in finding answers rather than asking questions. An education which consists in asking questions is, however, the only education which is creative and capable of stimulating people’s capacity to experience surprise, to respond to their surprise and to solve their fundamental existential problems. It is knowledge itself...The easiest way is precisely the pedagogy of giving answers, but in that way absolutely nothing is put at risk... [intellectuals and people] should dare to take risks, should expose themselves to risk, as one way of advancing in knowledge, of truly learning and teaching...if you do not engage in adventure, it is impossible to be creative. Any educational practice based on standardisation, on what is laid down in advance, on routine in which everything is predetermined, is bureaucratising and thus anti-democratic...’ (2001, p. 228).

The importance of the question in education – and most especially in research – is therefore paramount. Anything less than that risks what Freire calls ‘the castration of curiosity’ (2001, p. 222). It is in pressing, probing and interrogating that the research project is born in the heat of the intellectual crucible. Moreover, research itself is vital to the overall educational task. The alternative – against which Freire sets his face – is a kind of ‘Lego’ knowledge – simply ‘snapping together’ pre-formed bricks and building a shape or object to a pre-determined plan, or joining the dots. This is the great danger of an

overly heavy and centralised curriculum – it does not permit space to explore, think, challenge and even to revolt. It teaches people answers; but it does not teach them *how* to question. It teaches students what to say; but not how to reason for themselves. It protects vested interests, by not allowing sufficient scope for students to frame questions and create new ideas. In other words, it can castrate curiosity. It can lead to just joining the dots.

Clearly, therefore, true education must separate itself from any desire to *confirm* what is already known. It must always question what is assumed to be known. And it must always question itself (including its cherished methodologies and insights); it always leads to new questions and new knowledge. So what might this mean for the teaching of religion, for example, in our schools, and perhaps our universities too, and maybe even in our seminaries? Ursula King (2002) challenges the dominant enlightenment paradigm for studying religion, which assumes that religion could be apprehended and comprehended through ‘some form of objective, scientific knowledge’ (2002, p. 382).

Arguing that such approaches are becoming passé, King suggests that the new scholars of religion need to strike a balance between being generalists, comparatists and specialists. Moreover, there is also a need for the scholar to recognise that a certain amount of empathetic immersion into the field of enquiry is no bad thing, since this also constitutes part of the learning, to which, presumably, universities and individual researchers are committed. Thus she writes:

‘Our specialized findings should not remain imprisoned in an ivory tower existence but, rather, need to be integrated into meaningful knowledge related to human praxis and a viable life world...the viable transformation of religious studies will depend on whether it has sufficient flexibility to respond to different ideas, to a different context of study, and to the need for a different purpose... This is a tall order, but I believe passionately that religious studies can fire people’s minds and hearts; it can help them to know and understand, to analyse and explain, but also to love, to grow strong and confident and to care and be compassionate. In other words, as an object of human enquiry the study of religions can communicate an empowering intellectual and emotional vision...’ (King, 2002, pp. 383-4).

Taking such an agenda forward would, of course, require a more collaborative approach to learning. Unfortunately, with rare exceptions such programmes are rarely found. Commenting on the fragmentation and concentration of theological training programmes in the USA, Poling and Miller note how ordinands (or seminarians) are pulled deeply into isolated and disconnected wells of expertise, such as biblical studies, church history and various types of (competing) theologies. In contrast, they argue for a process of

‘...community formation [establishing] critical awareness of the tradition, focused

community planning...reinterpreting the interplay of covenant and tradition...stimulat(ing) the formation community...[standing] between the interpretive and political processes...as midwife to community formation...' (Poling & Miller, 1985, p. 147).

Now, that's a curious phrase – 'midwife to community formation': what can it mean? One thinks instantly of the Socratic idea of the educator as midwife. Of the idea of education returning to its etymological roots, for it means to 'draw out'. (Seminary, indeed, is rooted in the idea of 'seed'). Education is not merely cramming in and ramming home facts. It draws something out of the child or the student.

Socrates believed in what we now call *Maieutics* – the belief that many important lessons and truths cannot be taught directly as a transmission of knowledge from an instructor to a learner, but instead the learner learns these truths by interacting with an instructor and through his or her own experience. In his *Symposium*, Socrates claims that a student is not an empty vessel to be filled with the wisdom of their teacher: 'if only wisdom were like water which always flows from a full cup into an empty one'. Instead, one must act as 'a midwife' to a student's learning. In the *Theatetus* Socrates explains, 'my art of midwifery is in general like theirs, (but) my concern is not with the body but with the soul that is in travail of birth'. Additionally (and different from real midwifery) Socrates says his role is simple: to test the strength and realness of the ideas his students give birth to, through questions and challenges.

Now, all this talk of education-as-midwifery leads to a more personal reflection here. I was born in 1962 in what used to be called 'a home for naughty girls', in Blackburn, Lancashire – far away from the curtain-twitching neighbors of my birth mother's street in south Manchester. It was bad birth; and for about a year, the doctors thought I might be physically damaged and with learning difficulties. (I realise some of you are thinking, crumbs, that was a good early spot by the doctors). The letter from Lancashire County Council says:

'you were 6lb 4oz when born, but it was a difficult delivery resulting in some concern for your wellbeing. For that reason, it was decided to place you with your family on a fostering basis whilst monitoring your progress...so you remained in the mother and baby home...when you appeared to be developing normally and meeting your milestones, and adoption application was eventually granted...'

I was not a promising pupil when I eventually got school. I cried on my second day. Such a fuss had been made about my first day, which I survived and enjoyed. But no-one had warned me that there were years of this stretching ahead. Most of my time I struggled, and it wasn't really until I sat A-levels that I began to really enjoy learning. And I mean really enjoy it.



Although my parents had both left school at 14, and none of my brothers have into higher education after their schooling, I still contend that home is where we do a lot of our learning. I learnt a lot about openness by being adopted. And adoption is not one legal act; it is also a continual process of openness. Christian thinking orthodoxy teaches a kind of double adoption: in return for our adoption of Jesus, we are ourselves adopted into the life of God.

Moreover, the adoption is costly. Mary and Joseph both take a risk: ‘*Mary* asked the angel, “How *can* this be, since I *have* not known a *man*?” (Luke 1: 34). But in accepting something alien, rejection is averted, and hospitality and love are shown instead. Hospitality, love and redemption are, in turn, bestowed on humanity through God in Christ.

And then there is the education of Jesus. Where did he get his wisdom from? The kingdom that Jesus preached was more than just a creature of his adult imagination and inspirational prophetic vision. His childhood, I think, had probably taught him a thing or two about people, society and God. He grew up in occupied territories, so had seen the good and bad side of that coin – oppression traded off against organisation. His childhood had included a sojourn in Egypt. And we know that by working in Joseph’s trade – carpentry and building (Gk. *tekton*) – he had, by living in Nazareth, been exposed to the nearby Roman settlement of Sepphoris.

Sepphoris was a Hellenized community of almost 30,000 in Jesus’ childhood, compared to the population of Nazareth, which boasted a mere 300. So Nazareth was a dormitory village supplying labour to a much larger cosmopolitan community nearby. It would have been full of Gentiles of every kind. So, from an early age, Jesus would have been exposed to a world beyond his native parochial Judaism. The theatre at Sepphoris seated 5,000. It is almost certain that Joseph took Jesus. For Jesus, in his adult life, uses the Greek word ‘hypocrite’ quite a few times, which simply means ‘actor’ – one who is masked, and playing a part.

What is significant about this, I think, is this. Jesus’ Kingdom of God project, was, from the outset, supra-tribal. It reached out beyond Judaism to the Gentiles. Indeed, he often praised gentiles for their faith, and often scolded the apparently ‘orthodox’ religion of his kith and kin for its insularity and purity. Jesus saw that God was for everyone; he lived, practised and preached this. So the openness and Jesus saw and witnessed as a child, and which educated him, came out in his ministry.

Why does all this matter? Well, God has many children. But God has no grandchildren. That’s why our teaching and education matters so much. Our faith is not gained by descent, but by nurture. Teaching and educating those who are not your own. Cherishing those outside your family; not just those on the inside. Like many people with any kind of schooling, I look back now, and realise how remarkable our teachers

were. They were patient, and they were faithful. They believed in teaching. They believed in their pupils. They planted seeds of new ideas. They expanded our minds and our horizons of possibility. Few were lazy, and even fewer were poor. They were committed to this midwifery. In a way, they adopted us.

I think one of the saddest things about our age is that we undervalue our teachers. When you think of how much time our children spend in school, with strangers forming them into citizens, and teaching them what they need to know, and how to think and act, and how to discuss, our neglect of the teaching profession, and our disregard for teachers, is scandalous, tragic and criminal. I was recently speaking in some schools in Singapore on behalf of Oxford University, and was struck by a range of gift-wrapped presents in one of the staff rooms. Innocently, I asked if there had been a birthday or some other celebration. But I was told I had just missed National Teachers' Day – a day set aside by the government to affirm and celebrate teaching. Parents and pupils bring presents and tokens to the school, to express their appreciation of what the teachers do. So the staff room was crammed with chocolates, bottles, gifts and tokens. I cannot imagine this in England. I wish I could.

Teachers, you see, are *characters* that inspire us with their love. Here is what one writer has to say about algebra – not my favourite subject, I hasten to add:

I had a teacher who *loved* algebra, and made me feel it meant the world to him that I could love it too. When I do algebra, I think of him. I see his face, I hear his voice, and when I get stuck on a problem in mathematics, or maybe even a problem, you know, in life, I think of how it was he talked with me. I hear his voice as I think the problem through, it's like I talk with him about it. To me, algebra is what it felt like to learn it with Mr Norton, Interview with James Day; James Conroy (ed.), *Catholic Education: Inside-Out/Outside-In*, 1999, p. 277)

Education should be an interaction of love, says Nicholas Wolterstorff, (*Education for Life*, 2002, p. 105). And St Bernard of Clairvaux, no less, has this to say:

There are many who seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge: that is curiosity. There are others who desire to know in order that they may themselves be known: that is vanity. Others seek knowledge in order to sell it: that is dishonourable. But there are some who seek knowledge in order to edify others: that is love. (Quoted by Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden*, 1993, p. 60)

Why does love matter? Love is what we are born with, as Marianne Williamson reminds us. Fear is what we learn, if we are not careful. The spiritual pilgrimage, and the journey of education, is the unlearning of fear and prejudices and the acceptance of love back

in our hearts. Love is the essential reality and our purpose on earth. To be consciously aware of it, to experience love in ourselves and others, is the meaning of life. Meaning does not lie in things; not ultimately. True meaning lies in us, which is why teaching is so vital. This is costly; so costly. But as the old adage goes, if you think education is expensive, try ignorance. We can't afford to be un-educated; not to take the journey.

As I reflect upon the value of education today, I see it as a matter of love, life and liberty, and connected to the ideas of adoption and midwifery I have briefly touched upon. It is, in other words, personal, human, social and moral. A matter of the heart as much as the head; and it is about preparing pupils and students to be good citizens, not merely useful 'units' in the economic system. This is important, because as one writer says,

'...students who have been well served by good teachers may walk away angry – angry that their prejudices have been challenged and their sense of self shaken. That sort of dissatisfaction may be a sign that real education has happened. It can take many years for a student to feel grateful to a teacher who introduces a dissatisfying truth. A market model of (education), however apt its ethic of accountability, serves the cause poorly when it assumes that the customer is always right'. (Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life*, 1998, p. 94)

Education, in other words, also has to risk offence and difficult probing if it is to be the handmaiden of life, love and liberty. Just as you can't raise children without some sense of right and wrong, so it is with education. It can't all be neutral and nice. I was at a school recently, sitting in the reception area, and was struck by the Table of Values that towered over the welcome desk, like a kind of secular list of the Ten Commandments. The values were, apparently, no bullying; respect for all; care for the environment; and make sure you recycle what you can. There might have been others, but they did not register. And I was struck by how these might not be the strongest foundations upon which to continue building western civilisation.

The risk here is that by trying to be vapidly inclusive, we fail to teach, love and lead with passion. Not all political opinions are equal; some don't command respect. And yes, this is true of religion too. So the danger of a heavy culture of relativistic respect is that we run the risk of promoting spirituality at the expense of faith. But an emphasis on spirituality at the expense of religion is like smoking without inhaling. You may need to discover the substance behind it all, even if you don't agree with it.

The most interesting thing about religion is God (Evelyn Underhill); I am not saying you have to believe. We don't possess the truth; the truth possesses us. I am saying that cherishing what those beliefs bring to society is intrinsically and extrinsically *valuable*; education, vocation, generosity, sacrifice, inclusiveness, liberation; all are rooted in faith and passion. Faith in people. Something higher; something wider and deeper. The



writer I quoted a moment ago, Parker Palmer, has this to say:

‘Passion for the subject propels that subject, not the teacher, into the center of the learning circle...The passion with which [my mentor] lectured was not only for his subject but also for us to know his subject. He wanted us to meet and learn from the constant companions of his intellect and imagination, and he made those introductions in a way that was deeply integral to his own nature. Through this teacher and his lectures, some of us joined a powerful form of community marked by the ability to talk with the dead.’ (Parker J. Palmer, *The Courage to Teach*, 1998, pp. 120, 137).

Yes, education is expensive. But at its best, it is also expansive. And it is ‘womb to tomb’, in the immortal words of Riff in *Westside Story*. This was something Alcuin of York recognised, who advised the Emperor Charlemagne. The best educations are life and world transforming; for all, not just those lucky enough to receive such an education. If I might be permitted a brief reference to Christ Church here, I could say something about our Nobel Prize Winners. Or that Christ Church has produced thirteen British Prime Ministers, which is equal to the number produced by all 45 other Oxford colleges put together and more than any Cambridge college (and two short of the total number for the University of Cambridge of fifteen). But I prefer to talk about the founding of Oxfam, which was started in Oxford, with half the founders from Christ Church. Oxfam now works in 86 countries. Or of the young student I met on my first day as Dean, working on a cure for Ebola. Or that through its charitable work, it supports a range of activities in the arts, public life, and social welfare, including, *Ovalhouse* (youth drama in Brixton), *IntoUniversity* (a project helping hundreds of very young children from deprived backgrounds in Blackbird Leys towards the opportunity of higher education) and the *Tower Poetry Prize* (encourages young people to write publishable poetry).

Education, said Einstein (who by the way, also spent five years at Christ Church), is what is left when we have forgotten everything else. It is a telling phrase. And it is not, I think, in the same league as Mark Twain saying that he never let schooling get in the way of his education; or Winston Churchill, for that matter, telling us the only time his education was interrupted was when he was at school. So what is Einstein saying? That what education produces, inspires, instils and forms is sedimentary and elementary. And that these are such valuable life-lessons, they cannot be forgotten.

John Dewey, who I mentioned earlier, began his Laboratory School in 1896. Few have heard of Dewey – in fact of any of our great educationalists in the twentieth century, or will remember the Hadow or Plowden Reports that argued for progressive education. But invariably, they owe some debt to Dewey’s work and



insights. Dewey started with sixteen pupils in the Hyde Park area of Chicago. His aim was to create a cooperative school community in which mechanical and drilling methods of schooling were replaced by conversation, and through real-life projects. He wrote up his project in *Experience and Education* (1938). Dewey was a bit of a polymath; a Professor of Philosophy at Michigan and Columbia, he did not confine his academic thinking to one field, but ranged freely through psychology, education, politics and other subjects. He believed that there was an integral relationship between education and democracy; how we live is through how we learn. In his *How We Think* (1910), he draws a distinction between belief and reflective thought, and argued the latter was crucial to education.

In other words, he did not believe that good education consisted of filling an empty pale, but rather lighting a fire. Just as Freire would later argue, Dewey saw education as something that was critical for social development, 'a mode of associated living; a conjoint communicated experience'. Education was political, and critical. For Dewey, there was difference between knowledge and information. Pupils needed information, which was merely imparted – but knowledge was discovered, and so went much deeper. Thus, Dewey wanted his pupils to grown into critically-aware adults, who would develop habits of curiosity, testing, and challenging – all leading to a deepening of reflective thought. For Dewey, education built in a capacity to resist simply colluding with the status quo. Education was inherently progressive, questing and restless. It took risks.

I mention this at the end, because are sometimes surprised by how we learn. And sometimes to learn, we have to deliberately un-learn. A friend of mine recently described the experience of being taught to touch-type after more than thirty years as an academic. He said that for three weeks after the course, his typing speed halved, and he almost ground to a halt. But he persisted, and a month later, could type twice as fast as before. His colleague, on the same course, did not persist, and still types in the same old way. The lesson of letting go, of un-learning and starting from scratch, was something he could not manage.

Over the past few years, I have benefitted enormously from another kind of un-learning, which is generally dubbed 'mindfulness', and have had the good fortune to be tutored by one of the country's leading experts. Mindfulness is hard to describe – attention to the breath, and letting go – would be a partial description. But its great strength is the perspective it brings. It does not directly impute new knowledge. What it does is search out what is already there; it finds the things we often miss in peripheral vision. It connects the heart, head and body to our breath. It is able to remove most of the noise and clutter that distract us all the time from noticing, and learning, and re-centre individuals with a sense of numinous poise and peace. It is an education, trust me; and one that is increasingly



helping us in our schools.

Now, lest this sound slightly “New-Age”, let me remind you, perhaps, of Robert Bellah’s famous essay (‘To Kill and Survive or To Die and Become: The Active Life and Contemplative Life as Ways of Being Adult’) in Erik Erikson’s famous book on *Adulthood* (1978). In this, Bellah draws on ancient Greek philosophy to show how the higher life – intellectual and spiritual – is fed by the contemplative. Bellah, like Erikson, does not favour one over the other. But following Aristotle, Plato and Socrates, he says that both are needed for the deep work of true, transformative and liberating education. Moreover, it is charity and wisdom that come through the contemplative, and lead to action. So the love of wisdom (*theoria*) – which only comes through the contemplative life – is, for example, in Aristotle, contrasted with the ‘active political life’ (*bios politikos*) and the practical life. But the polis – from which we get both the word ‘people’ and ‘politics’, or in other words, ‘society’ – according to Aristotle and Plato, must be rooted in the teaching and practice of contemplation. So, stopping, being still, contemplating – these things lead to love, charity, wisdom, - and these ideas were taken up by Augustine in his *City of God* many centuries later. As Bellah argues (p. 64), becoming educated, and becoming an adult, is about an active and contemplative life in which we take our place as citizens. To contemplate is to be have regard for the polis – those around us. As Jesus says, love of God and love of self or wisdom (contemplation) leads to love of neighbour (action). Contemplation deepens our education – and so, as Dewey argues, our life together as a people. Contemplation takes us into, then out of ourselves. Just imagine what our schools and universities would be like, as liberated communities of love and leering, if we could learn to simply...breathe. A

As R.S. Thomas says, sometimes you just have to let go of what you know, and trust, and be still. Here, you can learn. His poem, *Apostrophe*, catches this:

Improvisers, he thinks, making do with the gaps
in their knowledge; thousands of years
on the wrong track, consoling
themselves with the view by the way.
Their lives are an experiment in decep-
tion; they increase their
lenses to keep a receding future in sight.
In arid
museums they deplore the sluggishness of their ascent by a
bone



ladder to where they took off
into space-time. They are orbited
about an unstable centre,
punishing their resources to
remain in flight.
There are no journeys,
I tell them. Love turns
on its own axis, as do beauty and truth,
and wise are they
who in every generation
remain still to assess their nearness
to it by the magnitude of their shadow.

A vast amount goes on in our schools and universities. But far the most important is the daily matter of teaching, learning and research; educating our future leaders; forming citizens of character and virtue; shaping lives that will re-shape this world of ours. Simple things. Joining the dots can be important in teaching and development, but it is only one task of education. The moral question of our age is not 'how much can we know', but 'what can we *do* with what we know?'. For others; together; for the world. I know that our universities, colleges and schools struggle in a climate that undervalues education; there is even a culture occasionally attacks education. Our resources are spread thinly and unevenly. And I have not even been able to touch upon how demanding teaching can be, and how, as Stefan Collini and others warn, education is currently eroded and corroded by turning it into processes that form people into 'useful' economic units. It binds us, when it should free us.

So the vision is simple. Truth sets us free. Education enables us to become more fully human; it is a labour of love, and a vocation, in the service of love. Love of knowledge; love of its power to transform lives and change communities; love of the liberty it brings, because truth sets us free. Education is a craft; a craft that brings us not only the love of a subject, with progression and advancement. But love is the lesson. As William Langland puts it in *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, (c. 1370):



'Counseilleth me, Kynde', quod I, 'what craft be beste to lerne?'

'Lerne to love,' quod Kynde, 'and leef alle othere.'

Copyright: Ebor Lectures

THE
EBOR
LECTURES



Jointly organised by:



www.yorkminster.org



www.yorksja.ac.uk



www.methodist.org.uk



www.carmelite.org