THE EXPERIENCE OF LEARNING

By HELEN MOYLE

what we came round to
in the end
is that all our thinking
has brought us nowhere

that the trail-blazing journey
has ended where it began
that thought is at best
a protection against further thought

that the heathens we sought to save
the masses to educate
need neither our salvation
nor our education

(from Richard Allen's *Epitaph for the western intelligentsia*)[1]

THIS IS GLOOMY STUFF. Richard Allen doubts whether thinking can be anything more than inoculation, wonders whether 'trail-blazing' educational journeys are anything more than momentarily distracting merry-go-rounds and fears that even the best of our teachers will retire barking disappointment. It is the tombstones of professional intellectuals that Allen wants to inscribe in these terms, but such doubts, wonderings and fears are expressed in other places too. My heathens are 8D, a group of twenty-six Australian outer suburban 13-year-olds in constant search of titillation. Teaching English to them, period 5 on a Friday afternoon, is something like facing a mischievous bushfire. No sooner is one spotfire put out (Mathew having stolen Abhinav's favourite pen yet again) than another two flame up in the corner of the room to which I have turned my back for the split second it takes to contain a spotfire with a deft flick of soaked hessian. At such moments my particular purposes are clear, having nothing to do with inspiring intellectual wayfaring, and I return to the staffroom lamenting. Allen's poem is both a solace and a goad. Where are our thinking and learning and teaching bringing us? Do we end where we begin?

My father is a carpenter who has a particular gift. He is able to see the possibilities residing in wood that others have abandoned. An old

door, spotted at a dry rubbish clearance, becomes the basis of a tailor-made desk for one of his daughters, and some off-cuts from a school workshop become sturdy wheels on a broken-down toy pram. To others these pieces may appear useless and without scope, but my father quietly takes them to a new place, makes them over for a new purpose and enjoys the success of the fit. True lessons will do for students what my father does for his precious wood, what a blacksmith does with iron, and what Donne hopes God will do for him.

> Batter my heart, three person'd God; for, you
> As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to mend;
> That I may rise, and stand, o'erthrow mee, and bend
> Your force, to breake, blowe, burn and make me new.
>
> (Donne, *Holy sonnets*, XIV)

Battered, broken and knocked about perhaps (or hammered, chiselled, turned), but on the way to being newly made. That's how a fair dinkum learner should feel. The best learning takes us to a place that is different from the one at which we started and prompts change in us that is essentially spiritual. For when we really expand our knowledge of the world and our place in it, the reverberations may be traced deep within. The fledgeling middle-school debater who rebuts decisively for the first time and the middle-aged teacher who is shrivelling within but who scales the heights of an abseiling course are both engaged in makeovers of the self. Each glimpses new aspects of the self-in-activity and this revelation takes hold, drawing out of their person what has been latent.

My father is most delighted when nothing of the salvaged item is left behind, when all is taken up into the new. And the very best kind of lessons are those that engage every part of the person. Learning that matters is emphatically not the same thing as intellectual exercise. This is something that I discovered when I began a post-graduate theology degree two years ago. Tutorials, seminars and lectures were all opportunities for intellectual pirouetting and some nit-picking. I revelled in thinking new thoughts with greater rigour. But it was the day I could no longer happily sing along to Jenny Morris' 'We'll get by with humanity' in the shower that I knew that my learning had taken me over. Learning that matters involves the integrated self: that core of our being that works as a centre for understanding and valuing; where rationality and feeling, memory and perception are not opposed; that socially and God-constructed reality from where our lives are really lived.

'Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else.'[2]

When I went to Sunday School we learnt Bible verses and were rewarded with biblical stickers. At school we learnt tables and formulae for maths exams and German poems for the Goethe competition. We do not require students to learn by heart as much as we used to. Indeed learning of the kind desired by that 'man of realities', Dickens' Thomas Gradgrind, has been out of fashion so long now that it has become impossible to discuss it without verbally spitting on it. Just as that technological marvel, the artificial heart, only fulfils its purpose when placed within someone's chest, so the cold facts of detached learning may only be brought to fruition when placed within the context of worthy vision.

This placement is the teaching goal we have set ourselves and the goal that we have clearly not met. We may not insist that our students learn by heart any more but neither have we always secured the thing that we want: the heart's involvement in learning. Students of all kinds and all ages and in all places are regularly rewarded and applauded and sustained in lip-deep learning, learning that takes them nowhere and has no effect on their person. There is some very sophisticated role-learning going on in our community; it happens wherever expanding knowledge is detached from discussion of priorities and visions and questions about degrees of goodness and evil. Evan Jones, writing after Hiroshima, has no doubt that it is teachers and academics who must bear responsibility for an educational culture that is passionless.

> Teachers, you should have more to teach than learning;
> Scientists, there is no mere natural calm;
> Historians, you are not plighted to the past;
> You are servants of society, your vision
> Must fight at every point against destruction
> Until perhaps our wisdom outweighs our violence.
>
> An age of such great violence, such great learning
> Dragging destruction with it from the past:
> Who should be calm to see such lack of vision?
>
> (from *Address to the pure scholars*)[3]

Who should be calm? Is 'more than learning' being taught in our schools? Are our places of scholarship stirred by fighting visionaries? And what of our churches? How and what are Christians learning? There have always been crises in state education and education generally. Our young people have not very often met the expectations of

business and tertiary leaders. The 'What are they (not) teaching our kids?' headline, that screams out dire news of lowest-ever standards, has appeared regularly in tabloids and broadsheets of all persuasions over the last century. This news of crisis in education must be seen to have more to do with the inveterate human tendency to believe oneself going down before the worst forces in history than it does with actual decline. But this is not the same as asserting that all is well in schools. Students are regularly set and complete, with varying degrees of diligence, unconnected pieces of detailed work by teachers who, for various reasons, have lost their way. They are managed by school administrators, who, subject to funding cuts, are beset by dilemmas about teacher conditions and student programmes. And these administrators are in turn governed by departments that are primarily guided by business principles. In such circumstances schools do struggle to provide the transforming education that is their charter. Questions about what education might mean and do for young people are placed last on the agenda and summarily discussed.

Neither is everything well in our churches. How much time do church communities spend together? What do they do with that time? To what purposes are those activities directed? The study and interest groups that are the mainstay of many people's experience of church life are not always focused on the coming of the kingdom. Under the structure of guilds and fellowships men and women offer each other short, comforting homilies before getting on with the real business of viewing slides or learning a craft. Participants in uncritical Bible study groups accumulate ignorance, find what the psyche needs to find, allow opportunity for indulgent biography and massage familiar notions about the way the world works and the way God works. And in Sunday schools children are urged to be nice to each other and to strive to be good. In such circumstances, faith, rather than compelling the faithful to take hold of life and genuinely grapple with its tensions, represents an awful lethargy about life. What frustrates learning within our churches looks strikingly like a non-thinking, too-settled piety.

It would be arrogant, and much less than fair, to declare the teacherly structures and practices and people of church or state wholly incapable of educating their members in transforming ways. Nonetheless these structures, practices and people are too often found sleeping with the enemy. It is no news that reform is needed. Indeed educational reformers are busy within our churches and schools and the earnest eradication of errors and abuses is laudable, welcome endeavour. Yet reformation should keep company with the promotion of all that is

right and helpful. Good habits need to be nurtured at the same time as bad habits are abandoned. And this depends on being able to recognize good learning when we see it.

Rousing learning

It was 1995 when I took a year's leave from my teaching job to begin the Bachelor of Divinity degree. There followed a time of study and spiritual reflection that was profound in its effect on my person, a year marked by learning that I can only categorize as of the burstingly gleeful kind.

While I often pictured myself running stupidly around an orienteering course, bearings lost, hoping desperately for any orange clue, the moments that remain at the core of memory are those when my panting self leapt forward in joyful recognition of its place in the world. When, in a Greek pre-sessional, Dorothy Lee spoke about the tragic irony contained in the first verses of John's Gospel, and when, in the Faculty Library, Brueggemann's comment on the Psalms showed the way that acclamation might emerge out of disappointment, and when I read Torrance on how things might best be known, my heart beat faster. These sayings were somehow in tune with the very texture of life and I was in the midst of them.

Along with this sense of sudden orientation was the experience of liberation. In Christology seminars Bruce Barber passionately urged us to identify our presuppositions about God and dismantle inherited nonsense. I was both startled by the extent to which my mind was shackled, and excited by the possibility of transfiguration, that most hoped-for experience. In a world that appears mostly spoiled and smudged there is great hope in the idea that clarity can be retrieved and vitality recovered.

> And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
> And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
> Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.
>
> And, for all this, nature is never spent;
> There lives the dearest freshness deep down things . . .
> (Hopkins, 'God's grandeur')

What the best learning feels like is a quickening of the blood and a keenness to hear the next sentence, read the next page. It is punctuated by moments of delight, when the learner, broken, breaks through the daily drudgerous thoughts, the too familiar limits on apprehension, and

experiences an expansion of the self, an inner flourishing, that is felt as release from identity. It is an encounter with newness, that 'dearest freshness deep down things' that was and is the promise and summons of Christian faith; that which brings a holy kind of gladness (Mk 12:37b).

Authentic learning is energizing, invigorating, percussive. It rouses the soul. Many good things have followed from my study of theology. I listen to the lectionary and to sermonizing with greater discernment and satisfaction. I contribute to discussion groups and worship with replenishing confidence. Because my faith has become more scripturally and systematically grounded, I sense that I am able to bring more valid criticisms and endorsements now, and be far more purposeful in teaching the children of the Uniting Church of which I am part. And in my working and family life, in my involvement in and attention to public affairs, I am better able to draw out the significance of events and decisions. It becomes more and more possible to interpret the world, to make sense of the panoply of experience to which we are exposed and to judge at which points intervention may be important and helpful. Underlying this is an immense sense of the preciousness of life now and a desire to live it abundantly and well.

That such powerful, gracious, happy experience is possible should not surprise us so much. At the heart of the Christian gospel is the news of being taken to a new place and made over for a new purpose. Our stories are held together by motifs of journeying ('. . . Jesus took with him Peter and James and John, and led them up a high mountain apart, by themselves . . .') and transfiguration ('. . . and he was transformed before them, and his clothes became white such as no one on earth could bleach them . . .' Mk 9: 2–3). Rather than join Peter, James and John in terror and nervous activity, we would do well to face up to the nature of the faith to which we are called.

This is not to assert that the road to learning is always straightforwardly joyful. Indeed, at times the journey may be downright fearsome, making even the feistiest of pupils retreat. It is my observation that the experience of learning as pure threat and of our teachers as harassers is one to which students of theology (in the broadest sense) are particularly prone. Even apparently innocuous theological discussion has the capacity to touch us at a level that unsettles and distresses. Our first response to such trauma may be flight, but uncomfortable feelings are often an essential part of the learning process. We should not run from discomfort, because it may signal the onset of change by the adjustment of constructs and the dismantling and reassembly of

categories. Yet neither should students tolerate ongoing uncertainty or confusion. For if we do not move beyond trauma then opportunities for learning are not taken up and learners end where they began. In such cases, instead of ennobling transformation there is a radical loss of confidence, or, alternatively, a defensiveness marked by regression, rigidity and repetition.

> 'Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?' (Mk 8: 17b–18)

The disciples of Mark's Gospel are well acquainted with uncomfortable feelings and adept in the art of ossification. The Marcan Jesus provides many opportunities for his disciples to learn but they resist the banquet, hanging on to old categories and inhabiting consciousnesses that refuse to be traumatized or re-assembled. They are frustrated, dismayed, pained, angered, confused and fearful in turn, but rather than make discomfort an opportunity for spiritual enrichment these learners choose to shut down. Jesus' words barely penetrate the surface of their perception, let alone reach their hardened hearts.

Openness and desire and prayer

The Marcan disciples' pathetic response to Jesus prompts questions in me about what would have made a difference and what does make a difference. What are the conditions under which transforming learning is more likely to take place? What are the habits of mind that allow good news to be understood, seen, heard and remembered? And, given that the psychological fitness of a person for learning is itself dependent upon the kind of environment in which the learner is situated, what are the settings that will promote and nurture such habits of mind? John's account of Martha's encounter with Jesus at the time of Lazarus' resurrection provides a first clue.

> Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.' (Jn 11: 24–27)

Martha's response to Jesus' instruction is to lay down superseded categories and apprehend the eschatological nature of the man before

her. She is an open swimmer, in possession of a sense of self that is solid enough to face the exposure, examination and capitulation of held belief. What matters, first, is that learners have the capacity to deliver up those habits of mind and pivotal interpretations of autobiography that make them reluctant to take the intellectual garment from the rack, enter the change-rooms and try it on for size. Better learners are those who are aware of the need to identify and put to one side well-worn preconceptions so that they might grasp the new or other as it is, rather than as they wish or assume it to be.

Of course such openness must be underpinned by desire if learning is to happen at all. And that desire must be present to a degree that overcomes the human propensity to lethargy. Top students are those who combine a hunger for coherence with a cheerfully energetic disposition, aware that the way may be rough but that perseverance will most often bring reward.

What is also needful, if learning about God is to be brought to the centre of a person, is a commitment to prayer and to a discipline of purposeful obedience by which new thought, observation and insight are really absorbed. Rather than compartmentalizing knowledge, taking one piece of food from the plate at a time, better learners create a salad of flavours, so that all the items present can touch and modify each other. Connections must be made between the experience of intellectual assent and delight on the one hand, and intention and action in the rest of life on the other. Learning that really matters will be arrived at worshipfully.

Companions, approximations, teachers and time

It will also be arrived at companionably. Since these vital connections are worked out through relating with others as well as with God, it is essential that the learner's journey be a co-operative one. Private reflection has its place but in the end new ideas need to be tried out and confirmed in honest talk. Learners need to be pressed away from laziness and towards the effortful task of giving coherent accounts of learning. It is only in this way that learning may truly be brought to fruition. If our learning colleagues are our companions then we will be able to test our understandings and admit our confusions. In such a setting we may not kid ourselves.

Such discussions need to happen in a place where there is an underlying respect for mind work; indeed an intense regard for it. Learners in Christ will regard preparation and attendance at meetings and discussion groups as activities to be embraced rather than matters

for obligation and groaning. In this way the community will show mindfulness of a call to faith that insists upon growth and involves rather than side-steps the grey matter. At the heart of church life must be the understanding that a faith that does not move forward, that is not open to new experience and report, is plainly inadequate.

Moreover, the best educational settings will be grounded in a true understanding of the relationship between learning and faith. Those who would teach an authoritarian Christianity, that is, a set of beliefs to be transmitted, received and known, are mistaken about both learning and faith. For faith commits us to a kind of learning that is quite different from that of passive accumulation. We are obliged both to know and to work out that knowledge in life. Christianity is relationship with God and with others, and its end is knowing God better. Learning in faith is thus an ongoing process of approximation: of trying out interpretations of God's word, testing these against new, maturing, experience and listening to the experience of others. While this may be labelled anti-authoritarian it is not the same as a lack of respect for authority. The current folk wisdom that everyone is entitled to their own opinion needs to be balanced by a healthy respect for past and present thinkers and for those who have undertaken disciplined training. The role of the teacher should not be overlooked or their wisdom undervalued.

Finally, an ideal setting will generally offer its learners time. Learners need time to integrate the new. Open-ended time frames have their own problems but when there is simply not enough time the kind of focus needed for the working out of more complex problems becomes difficult to maintain. The learner becomes acutely aware of the partiality of his or her progress and there follows dissatisfaction.

In all this there is no suggestion that all of these psychological and corporate dispositions must be present simultaneously and fully sprung if good learning is to occur. There is such a thing as learning by degrees. And transforming learning will occur despite bad environments and numerous unhelpful habits of mind and all our stumbling best efforts. The Spirit is loose in the world after all. There is grace and surprise and miracle, although it is also the case that individuals and communities need to be open to God and prepared to co-operate with God's will.

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NOTES

[1] In Les A. Murray, *Anthology of Australian religious poetry* (Victoria, 1986), p 123.
[2] Charles Dickens, *Hard times* (London, 1974), p 47.
[3] In Murray, *Anthology of Australian religious poetry*, p 255.