

ON COUNSELLING THE SIXTH FORMER¹

By PAUL EDWARDS

... he landed his crew with care;
Supporting each man on the top of the tide
By a finger entwined in his hair.

Here you have one of the greatest guides, mentors, counsellors in literature. Let me review part of his crew:

The crew was complete: it included a Boots –
A maker of Bonnets and Hoods –
A Barrister brought to arrange their disputes
And a Broker, to value their goods.
A Billiard marker whose skill was immense,
Might perhaps have won more than his share –
But a Banker, engaged at enormous expense,
Had the whole of their cash in his care.

The sublime Bellman had a crew of plainly differentiated individuals, with a variety of talents, each able to make a distinct contribution to their ineffable enterprise. The Bellman –

One could see he was wise,
The moment one looked in his face –

begins where I strive agonisingly to arrive, at individual differentiation and individual appreciation.

My efforts to hunt the snark – sorry! – to engage in counselling, stem from my reflections on our seminary education. There we had

¹ I did not intend to read a paper at Loyola Hall, but to talk from notes. So I proposed, but God disposed and I was indisposed. If my talk were to be given, it would have to be read, and therefore I hastily produced a paper to be read by a third party. The following is that paper with the most obvious stylistic roughnesses of the original smoothed over, and with some of my more elliptical remarks expanded.

The quotations, of course, with the exception of one from Lewis Carroll's correspondence, are all taken from 'The Hunting of the Snark'.

For the benefit of readers: the age of the sixth former in British secondary schools ranges from fifteen plus to eighteen.

an intricate machinery of formation, spiritual and intellectual: retreats and meditations, lectures and examinations ('paper, portfolio, pens, and ink in unfailing supplies'). The ascetical training, with the annual interview with the rector and regular spiritual direction, accepted the principle that each student required individual attention, but this was apparently not thought true of our general intellectual and cultural advance. Each year's intake was fed into the academic machine as so much undifferentiated raw material. Yet the differences were as great as they could have been (and perhaps greater than they should have been allowed to be).

We varied in age, especially when embarking on the study of philosophy, in the quantity and quality of previous education, and conspicuously in intellectual capacity. And we were submitted to a uniform procedure as though we were homogeneous units of teachability. True, we were divided after a while into the 'long' and 'short' courses. (Lewis Carroll would have appreciated the fact that the long and the short course occupied the same length of time.) But this rudimentary step towards differentiation could do as much harm as good, in that a man of reasonably high intellectual potential often found his way into the short course, compelled to accept himself as a low brow – 'his intellect small' – and thereby impoverishing both himself and his religious order.

The machinery existed to encourage writing, the art of speaking, the acquisition of general culture and wide reading, in that there were practice sermons, a good library and a domestic magazine: and once again there was no attempt to guide or spur the individual. Yet there coexisted with this abominably impersonal system a very real good will on the part of the teachers towards the taught. (I shall remember as long as I have a memory, how in the black days when I was failing my *ad audiendas*,² the rector of the seminary coached me day after day until I was over that particular hurdle.) This good will was not normally brought to bear on the individual student's progress. It no more promoted our learning than the Bellman's incessant tinkling affected the navigation of his vessel. Hence a great loss of potential talent among the students and a great wastage of goodwill among the teaching staff.

Any academic institution must, I suppose, proceed by categories, by generalizations, the honours students, the pass course, the arts

¹ *Ad audiendas confessiones* – the examination of the future priest which deals with the hearing of confession.

course, the 'science sixth' and so on. It is not enough to see that the individual student is in the right course, although this is no minor matter. There is also the question of how that individual student is to get the most out of his course, or, if you like, get the most out of himself inside that course. Nor is the prescribed course the whole, even of his academic education. For far too long we have thought of the teacher as exercising his responsibility and discharging his obligations by careful attention to his class teaching, by meticulousness in examining, diligence in those things which make the general machine run well. 'The bowsprit got mixed with the rudder sometimes' is not a more confused and irrational situation than the muddling of ends and means when people devotedly serve a system rather than the people for whom the system exists. And to serve the system, even when it is a good system, is always inadequate; for people are individuals and can only be adequately served as individuals. 'Supporting *each* man on top of the tide . . .'

With this in mind I have sought two things, to find for each boy an individual target and to set that target sufficiently high. I am more and more impressed by the wasted, or, if you like, unrealized potentiality of boys. (I suspect that the loss is decidedly higher among girls, but it is with boys that I deal.) A boy who is interested can do an unbelievable amount, study hard, play games, act in plays, read widely, be active in extra-curricular societies. This may seem contrary to all reason and common sense. There are only twenty-four hours in a day: and when a boy has slept, eaten and travelled to and from school there are not many left. Any one activity necessarily leaves less time for another. I can only repeat –

. . . I have said it twice,

That alone should encourage the crew –

that when a boy's interest in one thing increases, you are likely to get an increase in productivity in other spheres. Our mistake is to think that one individual can only accomplish the same amount in the same time. This is not true of comprehension and appreciation.

The Beaver confessed . . .

It had learned in ten minutes far more than all books

Would have taught it in seventy years.

Those proportions are rather high. But in the right circumstances the power of our minds to absorb can rise incredibly. It is in sixth formers that I have usually observed this phenomenon, but it can

be seen to a lesser degree in the mature adult. It has been very instructive to watch one's lay colleagues when they have applied for some important post and are preparing for interview. They absorb educational reports, digest ministry of education pamphlets, become very knowledgeable about the Certificate of Secondary Education and even tackle the New Mathematics. They learn more about education – or these aspects of education – in a few weeks than they have previously absorbed in the same number of years. And they will do all this without strain; indeed, apart from nervousness about the actual interview itself, they will find the whole business quite enjoyable – positively *stimulating*. Stimulation: here is the magic spell, whose formula eludes one.

They roused him with muffins – they roused him with ice –

They roused him with mustard and cress –

They roused him with jam and judicious advice . . .

Judicious advice sounds the least stimulating, doesn't it? But that is what one uses. Perhaps I ought to break away from routine and try mustard and cress.

I said at the beginning that I envied the Bellman in that his crew's capacity was already determined. I think that counselling should begin with most of the relevant information already digested by the counsellor. It should be a matter of revising a description, not of compiling it. Instead, a great deal of time goes on trying to build up a sufficiently detailed picture of the boy – and a good deal of energy. His ordinary level results are easily found. One may know something of his domestic background already. If not, there is no great difficulty, normally, in filling this in. But from then on one may have to work very hard for one's information.

You may seek it with thimbles – and seek it with care;

You may seek it with forks and hope . . .

This is not a matter of winning the lad's confidence, of overcoming reticence. The difficulty stems from the fact that he has often not reflected on himself, and is therefore quite inarticulate about himself. Besides care and hope, one needs to use formulae. For instance, to a question about outside interests I am liable to get the answer, 'Nothing, really'. Then I say, 'Tell me all you do between arriving home on Friday evening and going to bed on Sunday night'. Sometimes I drag a boy through an account of his summer vacation. The latter is much harder, as the longer period of time telescopes in the

memory. One gradually acquires a toolbag of such formulae.

Much of the information requires testing. Sometimes a boy will tell me that he does a good bit of reading. 'What have you read in the last month?' 'Oh, I don't get much time for reading during term!' 'What did you read during the vacation?' 'Oh, well, I got a job and I went abroad and there wasn't much time really'. Some of them claim an interest in art. When asked how they would distinguish between a Fra Angelico, a Rubens and a Van Gogh they look as though one had started to talk chinese.

This is beginning to sound as though I conduct an oral examination rather than give counsel. Of course it is important that one should not do so. But it is important that one's appraisal be as accurate as one can make it, and it is important that the boy should focus accurately on himself, not be vague and have no illusions. I have stressed that boys commonly have a far greater potential than we or they realise. But we must not confuse potential with what has so far been achieved. 'First catch your snark', if I may marry two victorians. The boy needs a vision of what he might achieve; he also needs a cold clear picture of what he has achieved so far. Then he can begin to think about bridging the gap. So I must insist on objectivity. This should be done delicately, but must be done.

Sometimes complacency must be deliberately shattered – or rather, dismantled piece by piece; and God deliver us from the temptation to sadistic satisfaction as we do it. The temptation to give vent to one's irritation is less serious but more common. To each counsellor his own irritability . . . 'a state of mind when the voice is gruffish, the manner roughish, and the temper huffish'. My venom sacs are activated by such face-saving understatements as, 'I haven't made up my mind yet' when it means, 'I haven't given it a thought'. 'I don't suppose I shall get a high mark in french' when it should be, 'I shall probably fail french'. These provoke me severely.

When I have laboriously formed my picture of the boy, carefully observing the many remaining gaps and uncertainties, I try to help him to form some vision of what he might make of himself. I don't think that I have any kind of technical gimmicks for this. To some extent its outlines may emerge as he describes himself. Sometimes one has to explore very patiently to make even a beginning.

And it would be indescribably wrong to try and provide a detailed picture of what he should aim at. Who am I, who is any counsellor that he should think himself capable of foreseeing what the boy may be like in a few years time? My advice is normally aimed at

keeping the maximum number of possibilities open, to allow for as many later variations as can be allowed for. In fact the word counselling, if it is taken to mean the handing out of positive directions, is misleading. It is not my job to give the boy answers, but to get him to ask himself questions. It is not my business to mark his answers to his own questions right or wrong. I can try to see that he looks hard for his answers, that he takes all the factors into consideration in arriving at them; I can try to ensure that he regards his answers as guides to action, not as theoretical truths. And the counsellor is not a second creator to remake the boy. It is blasphemy to try and remake him in one's own image. Yet this is probably the worst of the temptations, and the more difficult to overcome in that it is often unconscious, unconscious but terribly persistent. Can one change a boy at all? Or anyone else for that matter?¹ One can put certain facts in front of him, one may modify his views perhaps. Is it any use telling a lazy boy to work hard? Is it any use telling a careless boy to be careful? I believe that I should leave a boy in no doubt that he is lazy or careless. I may try and get him to focus on the consequences of laziness or carelessness. I am a fool if I think that I can blast away, wheedle away, or in any way remove by a vocal operation a deep seated characteristic.

Yet there are people whose remedy to any unsatisfactory conduct is 'I'll have a word with him'. And they say it as though 'having a word' with someone were a kind of character surgery, indeed even the latest kind of surgery where you literally give people a change of heart. By all means 'have a word with him'. It is the only civilized tool we have. But don't expect to knock him into shape – the shape you want – with it. Sometimes a man with considerable force of character can impress his views and wishes by crude verbal pressure. And a boy who can be impressed in that way will respond just as readily to other pressures at other times. You have produced a purely temporary conformity.

If I have a thoroughly lazy boy whose opportunities are melting away, I try to give him three warnings. ('What I tell you three times is true'.) I wonder if I ought to give him more than two?

The hagiography which we read in our earlier years described the saints as converting practically every sinner they came across, and inspiring every respectable person they encountered to great holiness. I think that the memory of these pious works remains in our

¹ How I should have liked to put this question to my audience!

minds and that we judge ourselves by these achievements. I can only say here that Christ seems to have been a much less effective preacher than saints one used to read of. What a small minority seem to have been changed by his words! How many sinners he left unconverted, how many complacent mediocrities in their mediocrity! He told us that the seed falls on the path way and is trampled, that it gets eaten by the birds, choked by the thorns, shrivelled by the sun.

Yet many of us walk out with a bag of indifferent seed and expect a rich harvest to spring up at our feet. And when we find that it doesn't, we want to shoot the birds, uproot the thorns, switch off the unnecessary sun, I suppose, and bulldoze the stony ground into a state of fertility. O, naive evangelist! Try and see that there is good grain in your bag, as good as you can get, and that you broadcast it over as much of the field as you can reach. Leave the rest to God. Don't try to remake his world except in the way he prescribed.

The counsellor should not expect too much from himself, perhaps should not expect *much* from himself at all. What are the factors which have influenced, which are influencing that boy? I will not try to enumerate them, but they include heredity, home environment, companions, the mass media, and what it used to be right to call the general 'climate of opinion'. How big do you bulk against that background? It is megalomania to consider oneself and one's little interviews as a factor of equal weight. Of course, a small weight may tip a balance, a small amount of a catalyst may initiate a large-scale chemical change. But these are not the commonest situations. It is a merciful fact that our responsibility is not of that scale. It would be insupportable if it were.

Perhaps I should now attempt to say what qualities a counsellor most needs; at least what I think he needs. I should put first the power to see visions. I am not going to explain that term. Like colours, visions cannot be explained to those who do not see them. I regard it as a counsellor's principal task to help his clients to see visions – to help them to see them, not to push his own on them; and the colour blind cannot help you to appreciate colours. Secondly, he must be realistic. Visions have nothing to do with illusions; visions consist of the possibilities inherent in crude fact. A true vision is fashioned only from reality. The counsellor must help to a clear-sighted appraisal of present fact.

Knowledge of any kind helps. A practical knowledge of people, abstruse knowledge about things academic, Dante, pop music, the art (not the science) of university entrance, the curve of normal

distribution, the divisions of engineering – nothing that the counsellor knows will in the end prove useless. I wish I knew a lot more about what my boys are like when I am not there. One's presence has a surprising effect on them. I once left a sodality leaders' meeting for a couple of minutes. As I came back I could hear that the same discussion was still on. But the boys' voices, manners and vocabulary had changed considerably in that short interval. How can I get that sort of knowledge unless I start secreting tape recorders or closed circuit television?

The need for patience requires no emphasis.

The need for energy may surprise those who think that because a counsellor spends a lot of time listening, he is therefore largely passive. Listening is an activity, especially when you are listening not only with your ears, but with all your knowledge and imagination, while allowing for your deficiencies in both. You have constantly to assess and reassess what is being said to you, and to think strenuously what you have to say in return, and when and how. Counselling is rather like playing chess, except that the shape of the board and the rules of play vary with each game, and you have to discover the variations while the game is in progress. And everyone you play brings a different set of pieces to the board.

Concern is more important than patience, knowledge or energy. I am not sure that it is really different from the power to see visions. Perhaps it is the power of one particular vision. You must be able to see each person as important. You must be able to see the individual as individually important. Easy words, and abstract ones at that! But you must *see* it, and *feel* it, be really moved by it, not just able to make fine phrases about it, or nod your head at someone else's phrases.

A boy can forgive impatience. He is exposed to a good deal of it. He will forgive ignorance and even mistakes if you do not pretend to be omniscient. But why should he care about you, if you do not care about him? To concern he will frequently, I do not say necessarily, respond. Concern is usually an excellent fertilizer, even on stony ground.

But to list the requirements for the practice of an art is all too often to discourage the apprentice. Enumerate the qualities of a good teacher, and take it seriously, and we should all have to resign and apply for a job painting the white line down the middle of second-class roads. Remember that the counsellor is less important than the teacher, the teacher less important than the parent; and the bulk

of the adult population is satisfied as to its substantial adequacy for the latter role.

You too can counsel! Highly intelligent adolescents can have very undeveloped powers of judgment. They can fail to appreciate the relative value of what a university lecturer says about his own department, and what their sister's boy friend's aunt's lodger, who read french at Bristol, says about engineering at Glasgow. The not so highly intelligent will commonly do what the others are doing, and think very little at all. Any adult who will simply ask them to consider some of their reasons for some of their choices will be doing them a considerable favour. The fact that you do not combine Socrates' capacity for dialogue and St Ignatius Loyola's power to discern spirits with an exhaustive knowledge of depth analysis and the educational expertise of the whole of Curzon Street,¹ is not an adequate reason for not taking up counselling. That many a boy will not get any help at all if you don't, is a compelling enough reason for trying.

'The thing can be done', said the Butcher, 'I think.

The thing must be done I am sure'.

'Do all that you know, and try all that you don't;

Not a chance must be wasted today'.

¹ The Offices of the Ministry of Education are in Curzon Street, London.