

THE BOWERBIRD COLLECTION

It is more important that we speak with a common heart than with a common tongue.

I initially chose to call this set of reflections after the Bowerbird, a bird that collects random objects. I thought this summed up what I try to do: collect thoughts and wisdom that make sense to me and piece them together into a thread of reflections.

However, it appears that I sold the Bowerbird short. I was very surprised when Google also reported this:

The Bowerbird's spiritual meaning centres on creativity, deliberate attraction, and the sacredness of transforming the mundane into the extraordinary....to curate one's life with intentionality, beauty and careful selection of possessions.

As you can imagine, I'm very pleased I chose this label for this collection.

Wisdom is a living stream, not an icon preserved in a museum. Only when we find the spring of wisdom in our own life can it flow to future generations.

Thich Nhat Hanh

This is a 'living' collection, and the document will be updated regularly for as long as I can read, reflect and discover new horizons. This is wonderful for curating my life and, hopefully, helpful for you as well.

We teach best that which we most need to learn.

Richard Bach

To journey without being changed is to be a nomad
To change without journeying is to be a chameleon
To journey and be transformed by the journey is to be a pilgrim.

Thank you for engaging with Our Common Heart.

Wayne

I counted my years and found that I have less time to live from here on than I have lived up to now.
I feel like that child who won a packet of sweets: he ate the first with pleasure, but when he realised that there were few left, he began to enjoy them intensely. I no longer have time for endless meetings where statutes, rules, procedures and internal regulations are discussed, knowing that nothing will be achieved. I no longer have time to support the absurd people who, despite their chronological age, haven't grown up.
My time is too short:
I want the essence;
My soul is in a hurry.
I don't have many sweets in the package anymore.
I want to live next to human people, very human, who know how to laugh at their mistakes, and who are not inflated by their triumphs, and who take on their responsibilities.
Thus, human dignity is defended, and we move towards truth and honesty. It is the essential that makes life worth living.
I want to surround myself with people who know how to touch hearts, people who have been taught by life's hard blows to grow with gentle touches of the soul.
Yes, I'm in a hurry, I'm in a hurry to live with the intensity that only maturity can give.
I don't intend to waste any of the leftover sweets.
I am sure they will be delicious, much more than what I have eaten so far.
My goal is to reach the end satisfied and at peace with my loved ones and my conscience.
We have two lives.
And the second begins when you realise you only have one.

Mário Raul de Moraes Andrade
(Oct 9, 1893 – Feb 25, 1945)

Brazilian poet, novelist, musicologist, art historian and critic, photographer

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Important Note for Readers:

So much depends on our idea of God. Yet no idea of God, however pure and perfect, is adequate to express God as God really is. Our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than about God.

Thomas Merton

The word 'God' has been so misused throughout history that it no longer speaks to me with clarity of the ineffable essence of Divine love and compassion. Therefore, I will use it sparingly in these reflections.

Instead, I will speak often of Universal Consciousness, Presence, Being (with a capital) or The Divine. Ultimately, though, as Merton reminds us, all names and labels are inadequate. The ineffable source of all-embracing love and compassion transcends all labels, denominations, creeds and ethnicities.

BEING: MY TRUE IDENTITY

There is a quiet light that shines in every heart. It draws no attention to itself, though it is always secretly there. It is what illuminates our minds to see beauty, our desire to seek possibility and our hearts to love life.

John O'Donohue

Knowing who you really are, you will find the constant (the source of being). Those who have this gain a new vision. They act with compassion; within themselves, they can find room for everything.

Lao Tzu

We are inextricably linked through a sacred spark within each of us, delivered from stardust, tending toward hope, and lit by love.

Melody Moezzi

Like the wonderful actors we admire, we can become totally immersed in playing the role of the person we think we are and are expected to be.

We can forget who we really are, in essence, outside of this role.

We are not separate beings struggling for survival, approval, or identity; this collection of thoughts, emotions, anxieties and preoccupations that we refer to as 'me'.

When you recognise that there is a voice in your head pretending to be you and never stops speaking, you are awakening from your unconscious identification with the stream of thinking. When you notice that voice, you realise that who you are is not the voice - the thinker - but the one who is aware of it.

Eckhart Tolle

We are not wanderers reaching for a remote and distant God.

We are not human beings looking for a spiritual experience; we are spiritual beings immersed in a human experience.

Teilhard de Chardin

Who are we, really?

All creation has its source in Universal Consciousness.

There exists a spark of The Divine in every one of us, and we are not separate from The Divine or from each other. A spark of the Being in whom we live and breathe.

As Meister Eckhart expressed it:

At the heart of who you are is the endless source and
boundless centre where God dwells.

Christian mystics refer to the Christ within; Buddhists call it our Buddha nature; for Hindus, it is Atman, the indwelling God.

We are all expressions of the Divine. Divine consciousness manifesting in human form.

At the heart of who we are, the Divine dwells and waits to be known. A sacred spark kindled by love and made visible through lives of kindness and compassion. Holiness and wholeness breathed into existence.

Just as a tiny ember contains the nature of the fire itself, so the Divine spark within each of us carries a longing for union with the Divine. There is something within the human spirit that is always reaching beyond itself, seeking truth, beauty, meaning, love, and transcendence. Beneath all our desires lies a deeper desire: the desire to return consciously to the Source of our Being.

Our Divine essence is birthless, deathless and changeless. It has remained constant through the bodily changes in this lifetime and will continue after we shed this body.

We are not isolated individuals trying to secure a separate existence; we are BEING itself expressed through a unique form.

As 'a being', we see ourselves as independent and in competition with each other, giving to get and measuring life by what we gain.

However, as BEING, we recognise we are inseparable from the Whole; distinct but not divided.

From this awareness, compassion and service become a natural expression of who we are. Giving and receiving become movements within the same unity, and joy arises not from acquisition but from living in alignment with our true nature, Oneness.

As the leaf emerges from the tree and is an expression of the life of the tree, so do we emerge from the Divine and are expressions of Divine love, generosity and compassion in the world.

I love walking through parks in Autumn and seeing all the brown leaves that have fallen to the ground. Having fulfilled their purpose of bringing beauty and joy to the world, adorning the tree with radiance and vitality, they now return to the earth that gave them life and allowed them to shine. Their task is complete. Oh, that this be said of me when I pass!

The Indian saint Kabir captured this mystery with profound simplicity:

As oil is in the oilseed
As fire is in the flint
As fragrance is in the flower
As air pervades all space
My Lord is living in every human being.

A wave is not separate from the ocean. It is an individual expression of the ocean in beautiful, glorious, and powerful form. And when that expression is complete, the wave recedes back into the ocean from where it came.

And so, it is with the Divine and us.

We are not the total of everything that Divinity encompasses, but our lives are waves in the ocean of divinity, temporary expressions of the Divine, cresting for a moment in beauty and purpose.

When our work is done, we too will recede back into the ocean of bliss and universal consciousness.

We do not 'come into' this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree. As the ocean 'waves,' the universe 'peoples.'
Every individual is an expression of the whole realm of nature, a unique action of the total universe.

Alan Watts

Contemplation of the rhythm of the ocean gives us a far clearer picture of our identity than any mirror ever can.

The coming to consciousness is not a discovery of some new thing; it is a long and painful return to that which has always been.

Helen Luke

We are expressions of the One Life, waves of the One Great Ocean, sacred sparks of the One Divine Fire, instruments through which God's love and compassion become known in the world.

Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the spirit of God dwells in you?

1 Corinthians 3:16

The true Self is who you are because of the divine indwelling, the Holy Spirit living within you.

Romans 8:9

The Lord is enshrined in the hearts of all.

The Self is one. The Self is within all, and the Self transcends all.

Those who see all creatures in themselves and themselves in all creatures know no fear or grief.

The Self is everywhere. Immanent and transcendent.

Source of life for all creatures, spread your light so that I may see your blessed Self.

Even that very Self am I!

The Isha Upanishad

Still your mind in me, still yourself in me
And without doubt, you will be united with me,
The Lord of love, dwelling in your heart.

The Bhagavad Gita

In my heart, I found my beloved.

Now wherever I turn, God's face I see

In all beings and things - great and small.

The Divine light illuminates all space.

God is there in nature's beauty.

God is present in people, birds, and beasts -

God's power pervades all the worlds.

God is love, peace, and joy.

Swami Ramdas

Do not look for God outside yourself. God manifests in us as light in our spirit, warmth in our heart, and strength in our will.

Look within for the living God and be thankful.

Ask that God may live in you, that He may manifest through you.

Only God can transform human beings.

Everyone seeks the meaning of life. The meaning of life lies in communion with God.

Peter Deunov

Prayer and meditation begin with the remembering of who we really are. The realisation of our deepest identity as one with the Divine.

I searched for God and found only myself.
I searched for myself and found only God.

Rumi

We are told by Jesus to seek first the Kingdom of God, and that this Kingdom is within us. Meditation is a quest for homecoming to the one SELF. Unless we prioritise this inner abiding, we will never really know who we are.

In the noise and busyness of everyday life, the Spark is often obscured by distractions, fears, and the mind's endless chatter. We lose sight of the Fire. Meditation quiets the noise and allows us to rediscover the sacred presence that has been there all along.

Like a person gently blowing on an ember hidden beneath ash, meditation allows the Spark to glow more brightly. Over time, the ember becomes a flame, and the flame becomes the Sacred Fire that illuminates every aspect of our lives. The Fire is spread through kindness, love and compassion.

This is the practice of Presence.

One can see God only if one turns one's light toward one's own face.

Sri Ramakrishna

The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees in me: my eye and God's eye, that is one eye and one vision, one knowledge and one love.

Meister Eckhart

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the youngest son, having left home, lost his way and lived separately from his intimate relationship with his father. He wandered in foreign lands, driven by separation and ego-driven priorities. It wasn't until he recovered his identity as a loved and cherished child of his father that his humanity was restored.

And so, it should be with us.

Those who depart from this world without knowing who they are or what they truly desire have no freedom here or hereafter.

Those who leave here knowing who they are and what they truly desire have freedom everywhere, in this world and the next.

The Chandogya Upanishad

INTERBEING: WHO ARE WE TOGETHER?

Life is never alone.

We are always in a state of relatedness. Relationships are the most sacred place for awakening to who we really are.

Inextricably linked through a sacred spark within each of us, we are not separate from the Divine or from each other.

As the Fire grows within us, so too does our awareness of our interconnectedness. We begin to recognise that the same Divine Spark that burns within us also burns within every other person.

We share the same Divine essence; we are all brothers and sisters, sons and daughters of the Divine.

There is only the One Life expressing itself in countless forms. The Divine wears every face. Your heartbeat and mine echo the same sacred rhythm.

In India, this truth is recognised every time we use the greeting 'Namaste': the Divine in me honours the Divine in you.

African culture also has a word for this consciousness: Ubuntu.

In Ubuntu, we become fully human only in relationship with others. My humanity is inextricably bound up in yours. What humanises you humanises me. What dehumanises you dehumanises me.

All persons are tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly...I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the interrelated structure of reality.

Martin Luther King

The magnificent Redwood tree can live for a thousand years and grow to 35 stories tall. Yet these giants have a very shallow root system, rarely more than two meters deep. What sustains them is the way their roots grow sideways, searching for, connecting with, and interlocking with the roots of other trees. The Redwood cannot be the tallest tree on Earth alone.

The Redwood practices Ubuntu!

Similarly, in Hawaii, the word Aloha is used both to greet and to say goodbye. It should be used with great reverence since it is used to greet and honour the true essence or spirit residing in the person.

Aloha represents a way of life and a profound spirit of love, respect, and connection. It conveys a sense of warmth, kindness, and compassion toward others, along with a deep respect for nature and the universe. It speaks to a sense of being present with someone and sharing in the life force that connects all beings.

We are all the same... all the same... longing to find our way
back... back to the One... back to the only One.

Rumi

Modern science hints at what mystics have long intuited: that the pulse which moves through the universe also moves through us, linking every heart and atom in a communion of being.

In the words of quantum physicist John Hagelin:

At the deepest level of truth uncovered by science and by
philosophy is the fundamental truth of unity. At the deepest
subnuclear level of our reality, you and I are literally one.

To awaken to this truth is to see that there is no “other,” only the one life expressing itself in countless forms. As Mother Teresa said, ‘The problem with the world is that we have forgotten that we belong to each other.’

In the one, there is the all. In the all, there is the one. If you
know this, you will never worry about being incomplete.

Lao Tzu

I once saw a photo taken in Damascus in 1899. The photo depicts a very short man named Samir. He is a Christian and cannot walk. He is being carried on another man’s back. He is a Muslim named Mohammed, and he is blind.

Mohammed relies on Samir to tell him where to go, and Samir uses his friend's back to navigate the city streets. They were both orphans and lived in the same room. They were always together.

Samir had a gift for storytelling and told stories to customers at the cafe in Damascus. Mohammed liked to listen to his friend's stories.

One day, when he retired to his room, Mohammed found his companion dead. He wept and mourned his friend for seven days straight. When asked how they got along so well, being of different religions, he said only this, while pointing to his heart:

"In here, we were the same person!"

Jesus' teaching to 'Love your neighbour as yourself,' could easily be understood as 'Love your neighbour because she or he is yourself'.

When we live from this awareness, compassion flows not as duty, but as the natural movement of our shared identity, our interbeing, our common heart.

I am not all that the Divine is, yet I am not separate from the Divine. I am not you, yet I am not separate from you.

In this mystery lies the essence of who we really are; the wellspring of love and compassion that makes us all One.

Children instinctively know that we all share a common humanity.

I was once in a restaurant in Lima. As people were eating, a poor man, accompanied by his little son, entered the restaurant and began selling sweets to get some money in a semi-dignified way.

As some of the patrons of the restaurant complained to the waiter about the presence of this 'intruder', the staff began to usher the man out of the restaurant.

As he was leaving, I couldn't help but see out of the corner of my eye that his little son, dirty and unkempt, had struck up a friendship with a boy of a similar age who was the son of one of the well-off patrons. Whilst all of this 'class battle' was happening between the adults, these two little boys became friends and were playing together in the corner. They were totally unaware of any distinctions between them or any societal or class norms that they were breaking.

The Gospel makes it clear that unless we become like these little children, our potential to experience the Divine and Divine vision for the world will be clouded.

If we allow exclusion and discomfort with 'the other' to dictate who we call our neighbour, we will continue to miss the teaching of the Gospel, and our humanity will continue to be impaired and incomplete.

In the way of love, the self and the other are one.

'Otherness' is an illusion.

The illusion that we are separate from one another is an optical delusion of consciousness.

Albert Einstein

This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. We free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of love and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Beneath all that divides us, there beats one common heart, illuminated by the same eternal Flame. Beyond our many differences, there is one Life, one humanity, one sacred Mystery expressing itself through countless faces. The Fire is calling us home, calling us beyond separation, beyond fear, beyond the illusion that we stand apart from one another or from the Divine.

And in that awakening, we remember who we have been all along.

Shine through us, and be so in us, that every soul we encounter may feel your presence in our souls.
Let them look up and see no longer us but only the Divine!
Let us thus praise you in the way you love best, by shining on those around us.
Let us preach You without preaching, not by words but by our example.

Cardinal Newman

You, the one from whom, on different paths, all of us have come.
You, to whom all of us are going on different paths.
Make strong in our hearts that which unites us.
Build bridges across that which divides us.
United, let us rejoice in our diversity, at one in our witness to your peace.
A rainbow to your glory.

David Steindl-Rast

OUR LIVES BECOME OUR PRACTICE

Even after all this time, the sun never says to the earth,
you owe me!
Look what happens with love like that. It lights up the
whole sky!

Hafiz

The essential nature of the Divine is love, compassion, and justice.

Mission, then, is the outpouring of love, compassion, and justice from the Divine to the world.

We don't have a mission. Divine mission has us!

Our role is to collaborate with the Divine, serve as instruments of the Divine mission, and embody divine love, compassion, and justice.

This was beautifully expressed by St. Teresa of Avila, who said that we are the eyes, the feet, and the hands with which divine compassion embraces the world.

In a moving scene from *Society of the Snow*, the story of survival in the Andes, Arturo (one of the initial survivors) speaks of his belief in God made visible through the actions of his friends:

I believe in the God that Roberto keeps inside his head when he comes to heal each of my wounds. I believe in the God Nando keeps in his legs, which lets him keep walking no matter what. I believe in Daniel's hands when he cuts the meat. And Fito gives it to us without saying which of our friends it belonged to.

I once visited a school in South Africa, where the large white statue of Edmund Rice, the inspiration for this school, at the entrance had been vandalised. Edmund's face had been smashed off the statue. However, after spending time at this school with the students and staff, Edmund's face was clearly visible in the life and relationships of this wonderful community.

Far more important!

In all our ordinariness, we are vehicles for God's presence and generosity.

Equally beautifully by Swami Ramdas from India:

When our heart burns at the sufferings of others, that is God's own heart. When eyes strain to see others happy, God Himself sees through them. When hands toil for others' relief, these hands move only by God's will.

I am deeply moved by Dostoevsky's description of Jesus:

He moves silently among people, his gentle smile of infinite compassion. The sun of love burns in his heart, and power from his eyes, and his radiance, shed on the people, stirs their hearts with responsive love.

Christians believe that in Jesus we have an undistorted picture of the Divine essence. The life and ministry of Jesus rendered Divine love visible, tangible, and concrete. All those who encountered Jesus had a new experience of the Divine, an experience of a new Consciousness.

In the words of Bishop John Shelby Spong:

Jesus was fully alive with the life of God, totally loving with the love of God, and possessed the capacity to be all that he could be; through these things, he revealed the very ground of being that we call God.

Jesus preached not a religion, nor an institution, nor even himself, but the Kingdom of God, a concept that is essentially about the righting of humanity.

Jesus had a vision for a world that arose from his heightened insight into Divine loving kindness. Jesus called his vision the 'Kingdom' or the 'Reign of God'.

As theologian Marcus Borg once wrote:

As a teacher of wisdom, Jesus was not primarily a teacher of what to believe or how to behave, but a teacher of a way or path of transformation. A way of transformation from a life in the world of conventional wisdom to a life centred in God.

When Jesus walked the earth, he was not attempting to create a new religion; he wanted people to experience the Divine.

The aim of Christian mission is to inspire people to embrace the model of Jesus' lifestyle and see the world through the eyes of the Divine. The wonderful thing about looking at the world with God's eyes is that all we can see is God!

Mission is about inspiring people to bring about the Reign of God and to live with love, compassion, inclusion, and justice. It is a vision for the building of a more just social order.

In the same way that Jesus and other sages and prophets have done, we too are called to reveal to the world the Divine essence of love and compassion enshrined in our hearts.

There is a story of a grandmother shopping for gifts for her grandchildren.

While in a toy store, she noticed a small homeless girl peering through the window. Moved with compassion, she invited the child inside and asked her to choose a gift. As they left the store, the girl held the grandmother's hand, looked into her gentle eyes, and asked, "Are you God?"

The grandmother, touched and a little surprised, replied, "No, my dear, I'm not God." The child asked again, "Then who are you?" The grandmother paused and said, "I am a child of God." The little girl beamed and said, "Yes, I could tell there was a connection."

Let that be true of us also.

When people encounter us, may they sense that same Divine connection in and through us. A presence that heals, welcomes, and uplifts.

We were created from love, by love, to love.

We are loved by the Divine not because we have earned it, but because love is the very nature of Divinity. Our worth does not rest on our goodness, but on Divine goodness.

We must let love flow through us as naturally as the perfume leaves the flower. Let all near us inhale that Divine breath.

The mystery of your life is that you are to do nothing less than this: to radiate God. Don't look for light outside yourself; look inside; darkness will do as

The mystery of your life is that you are to do nothing less than this: To radiate God. Don't look for the light outside of yourself. Look inside; darkness will do as a place to start.

Meister Eckhart

Love is the Divine in all. Whenever you live in love, the Divine manifests in you and can touch others through you.

When our hearts ache for the suffering of others, that is the Divine heart beating within us. When we long to see others joyful, it is through our eyes that the Divine

sees. And when we labour to ease someone's burden, our hands become instruments of Divine will.

We should aspire to become transparent to the Divine light which we all hold, and, as Brother Roger of Taizé reminded us: 'The more we live in this transparency, the more we become a source of peace for those around us.'

You are sent here to learn to love and to receive love. The greatest gift new love brings into your life is the awakening to the hidden love within.

John O'Donohue

The mystic Hafiz once wrote, "I am a hole in the flute that God's breath moves through. Listen to the music God makes through me."

Our mission is to become such instruments, through whom Divine music of love, compassion and peace is played.

The world is waiting for our music, the song that only we can sing.

Our life's purpose is to be the loving, compassionate, just, and inclusive face of the Divine to all who encounter us.

There was once a holy man who, after his meditation, saw a venomous snake drowning. Without hesitation, the man rescued the snake. In the process, the snake bit him. Due to his holiness, he survived. This happened twice more, and each time the snake bit the man.

The snake then said to the man, 'Why do you keep rescuing me when you know I will bite you. It's just who I am.'

The man calmly responded: 'I will always rescue you regardless of the danger because that's who I am!'

May this be who we are!

To experience and manifest the presence of the Divine.

To speak so loudly with our hearts that words become increasingly unimportant.

This is the most important praise or worship that the Divine asks of us. To live with love and compassion is the highest form of worship.

Whether one believes in religion or not... There isn't anyone who doesn't appreciate kindness and compassion.

The Dalai Lama

Our lives become our practice.

You are the soul of my soul. My life is an instrument of your purpose.

Hindu Mystic Shankara

Take Lord, unto Yourself, my sense of self; and let it vanish utterly.

Take, Lord, my life, live your life through me.

I live no longer, Lord, but in me, you now live.

Yes, between you and me, Lord, there is no longer room for 'I' and 'mine'.

This whole world is but the voice through which you speak to us.

Come, Lord, come and fill me wholly with Yourself.

Indian Saint and Poet Tukaram

Let our prayer echo that of John O'Donohue:

May I live this day
Compassionate of heart,
Clear in word,
Gracious in awareness,
Courageous in thought,
Generous in love.

Dag Hammarskjold left us a beautiful personal rendering of the Lord's Prayer:

Hallowed be Your Name, not mine
Your kingdom come, not mine
Your will be done, not mine
Give us peace with You,
Peace with people,
Peace with ourselves,
And free us from all fear.

You who are over us,
You who are one of us,
You who are also within us.
May all see You in me also.
May I prepare the way for You,
May I thank You for all that shall fall to my lot,
May I not forget the needs of others.
Keep me in Your love.
As You desire that all should be kept in mine.

May everything my being be directed to Your glory,
And may I never despair,
For I am under Your protection,
And in You all power and goodness.

Give me a pure heart- that I may see You,
A humble heart- that I may hear You,
A heart of Love- that I may serve You,
A heart of faith- that I may abide in You.

Patience visited me
And it reminded me
That good things take time to come to fruition
And grow slowly with stability

Peace visited me
And it reminded me
That I may remain calm through the storms of life
Regardless of the chaos surrounding me

Hope visited me
And it reminded me
Better times lay ahead
And it would always be there to guide and uplift me

Humility visited me
And it reminded me
That I may achieve it
Not by trying to shrink myself and make myself less
But by focusing on serving the world and uplifting those around me

Kindness visited me
And it reminded me
To be more gentle, forgiving and compassionate toward myself
And those surrounding me

Confidence visited me
And it reminded me
To not conceal or suppress my gifts and talents
In order to make others feel more comfortable
But to embrace what makes me

Focus visited me
And it reminded me
That other people's insecurities and judgements about me
It's not my problem
And I should redirect my attention
From others back to me

Freedom visited me

And it reminded me
That no one has control over my mindset, thoughts and wellbeing
But me

And love visited me
And it reminded me
That I need not search for it in others
As it lies within me

Rumi

OUR RESPONSE TO THE POOR AND MARGINALISED

The Gospel of the marginalised is where our credibility is at stake, discovered, and revealed.

Pope Francis

If we do not stand next to the poor, if we do not look at reality through their eyes, we will not be able to see, recognise or worship the God who walks with the poor.

Gustavo Gutiérrez

The way you look at them (the poor) will determine the way the whole world looks at us.

Sergio Viera De Mello

The Divine essence of love, compassion, and justice wishes fullness of life for all, not just a fortunate few. Living in an inhuman situation is contrary to Divine will.

We recognise and worship the Divine most completely in our service to the poor.

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads!
Whom dost thou worship in this lonely dark corner of a temple with doors all shut? Open thine eyes and see
Thy God is not before thee! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the path maker is breaking stones. He is with them in the sun and in the shower, and his garment is covered with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like him come down on the dusty soil!

Rabindranath Tagore's 'Gitanjali

Our voice must amplify the voice of the poor and the forgotten ones of the world:

- Those for whom mere survival is a constant challenge.
- Those who lack the basic resources to live a dignified life.
- The victims of structures that exclude and oppress them.
- Those people who lack adequate educational and healthcare opportunities and are excluded from decisions that affect them and their children.

Many of these people have no recognised existence. They are the 'non-persons', disposable in the eyes of the world.

It is our response to the plight of these people that determines the authenticity of our commitment to the Gospel and fidelity to the Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed.

I once encountered such a person, a young woman working as a domestic labourer in the city of Calcutta. A relief group was organising a self-help group of girls so that basic human rights could be advocated for and the girls might have a voice. The NGO advocates for these girls to employers to ensure that basic rights are in place: perhaps a day off a week, time to visit family occasionally, and some justice in wages and conditions.

When this girl attended her first gathering, she was given an identification card with her name on it. Even though she could not read or write, she was taught to recognise her name on the card. She immediately burst into tears, and when asked why, this young girl said that when she received the name card, it was the first time in her life that she had been formally recognised as a human being, as having an identity. It was the first time she felt she was someone.

How do you tell people like this young girl that God is love, and that this love makes us all brothers and sisters?

How can we show the poor and the excluded that they are children of the loving and compassionate Universal Consciousness who wills their compassion and offers the fullness of life to everyone?

We are told in the scriptures that our prayers, our liturgies, and our theologies are meaningless and incomplete if we fail to practise justice and stand with the marginalised.

To say that we believe that God loves the poor, judges on their behalf, wills their deliverance, but to do nothing ourselves to free the poor, to hear their pleas, to lift their burdens, to act on their behalf, is an empty faith indeed.

Joan Chittister

Bishop Samuel Ruiz Garcia from Mexico put it this way: 'The only question we will have to answer at the end of time is how we have treated the poor.'

He based his statement on the story of the Sheep and the Goats in the Gospel of Matthew. According to this Gospel, on the Last Day we will be judged by God on one basis: did we care for the poor?

Did we give bread to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked?

No orthodoxy tests are referred to here. There is no reference to creeds that must be recited or to catechetical requirements to meet. There are no questions about private morality. Only the question of how we have treated the poor.

I once travelled to Sri Lanka to meet theologian Fr Tissa Balasuriya.

A friend and I arrived at the sprawling compound where Fr Tissa lived and were met by a tiny little man with scraggly long white hair.

“So, you’ve come to talk theology!” Fr Tissa said when we first met. He promptly led us out of the room, down the stairs, across the compound, into the street, into a rickshaw, and before we fully realised what was happening, we had travelled for 45 minutes to the outskirts of Colombo to a slum area in which he had built a school for the poor. He took us to an area on the unfinished roof of the school, right in the middle of the slum, sat us down and said, “Now we can do theology!”

Fr Tissa didn’t need to say any more; his message was so clear.

We cannot reflect on the Reign of God, the Divine vision for a just and inclusive world, without focusing on the plight of the poor and what the Gospel’s ‘good news’ means for them.

In the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

...the worship of the people is meaningless without justice... learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

...the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.

Dag Hammarskjold

Some years ago, I visited the Christian Brothers’ community on the island of Negros in the Philippines.

One evening during our visit, a colleague and I were asked to lead the community in evening prayer. We put considerable time into preparing this prayer experience and carefully planned each step so the prayer would run as smoothly as possible.

However, during our prayer time, an interruption occurred. A lady who worked closely with the Brothers, accompanied by a family with a little baby, knocked loudly on the door.

I must admit, my first reaction was annoyance. Why couldn't this family have waited outside until we were finished?

However, after hearing the full story, I was ashamed of my reaction.

The little girl, Sophia, was three years old and had recently undergone an operation to remove a tumour from her stomach. When I got a close look at little Sophia, I could see that the reason the family had returned that evening was that the tumour had emerged again, and her stomach looked as if she had a basketball inside. Desperation had brought them to the Brothers' house that evening.

Sophia's mum and dad were very poor; they had several other children and lived some hours away. The Brothers had supported the family through Sophia's illness and had provided the resources for the initial operation. They had also undertaken to support the family during the potentially expensive subsequent therapies that little Sophia would need. However, it appeared that things were much more dire than originally thought, and Sophia was gravely ill.

What did I learn that evening?

I am sure that without doubt, the most pleasing thing to God that happened in that chapel that evening was not our well-planned prayers, but the openness of the Brothers' community to receive the poor family and to serve them as best they could.

There is no higher religion than human service. To work for the common good is the greatest creed.

Albert Schweitzer

The Divine Essence of love, compassion and justice, sides with the poor and those at the margins of life. We authentically worship this Essence by serving the poor. Service to the poor is worship!

The term 'preferential option for the poor' is commonly used in articulating priorities for Christian mission.

In Spanish, the use of the verb 'optar' implies making a significant choice in accord with one's deepest values and priorities. One may choose to marry a certain person, immigrate, or pursue a certain career. For lesser day-to-day choices, a different verb is used.

The choice of this verb by the Latin American theologians from whom the phrase originates was deliberate and implies much more than a simple choice between

alternatives. It implies that God decides to stand with and for the poor because of God's very nature.

For us, the decision to embrace a 'preferential option for the poor' implies a deliberate orientation in our lives and our structures towards the plight of the poor, a commitment to centre their needs and concerns.

It demands that we accept that we see the face of the Divine most clearly in the poor. It requires us to accept that ignoring the poor means that we ignore God.

We speak of our preferential option for those made poor because of our belief that poverty is not something that just happens; it is a human creation, the result of socio-economic mechanisms and structures that we have created.

It is not charity that the poor want. They want to be given a voice; they want us on their side to help them set right an unequal equation and enable them to rewrite their own story.

Fr Tony Herbert

To stand with the poor invokes what martyred El Salvadoran Jesuit Rutilio Grande called an 'impossible neutrality'. This option is not simply a call for a generous act to alleviate misery, but a demand to build a more just social order. It takes sides, becomes political, and asks disturbing questions about how things are and why this is so.

The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried!

G.K. Chesterton

Fr Rutilio warned his people not to be content with a God in the clouds, a muzzled, mute, and tame Christ. He proposed that if Jesus were to appear again in our world with his subversive message of inclusion and justice, many of us might call for his arrest and silencing. Why?

Because 'mission' is about the 'God of the poor', while most of us are not poor. It's about 'the view from the poor', while we may know nothing of what that looks like. It's about challenging social structures that can produce inequality, while those same structures may be very beneficial to us and our security.

I was walking in Delhi early in the morning, just as the city was waking up. I came across a family, a mother, a father and four children who sleep on the footpath in an area of the city just beside an ATM machine. I watched the family prepare for the day, cooking their breakfast and rolling up their bedding, all in the shadow of this modern machine.

I wonder what goes through the minds of people like these when they see others approaching the ATM, punching in a few numbers and, as if by miracle, great sums of money flow from the machine to the lucky person who knows the code.

So many questions arise:

- What must it feel like for that father to see other people so favoured by the 'gods', that great quantities of money flow to them when he, after preparing his family for the day, will have to go off to beg or work as a day labourer for a pittance, just to keep his family alive?
- How do you explain to these young children that it's not their father's or mother's fault that they can't access this flow of wealth from the machine that adorns their living space, in the way that a painting sits on the walls of our living rooms?
- How do these parents eventually explain to their children that they may never have a code for access to security and a dignified life?

On another occasion:

I was walking one evening in Calcutta. The centre of the city becomes a dormitory for thousands of people who sleep here but are cleared away in the mornings so that the day's business in a bustling city can begin. Near the main street, I spotted another family asleep on the footpath in front of a modern furniture store. Just inside the store window was a large double bed, complete with a thick mattress and linen. This family on the hard concrete was separated from this comfortable bed by a simple sheet of glass. Two worlds, a metre apart but as different as is imaginable.

More questions emerge:

- What stops a father from smashing the glass so that his family can have a decent place to sleep?
- What type of world is it that allows this stark separation to exist?
- How do these children grow into any sense of why they are on the outside, when there is ample unused bedding clearly in sight?

How could we ever convince people such as these that they are children of the loving and compassionate God who offers the fullness of life to everyone?

If the phrase 'preferential love of the poor' serves only to embarrass us, then we must keep using these words until they have become a reality we can grasp.

Fr Peter Hans Kolvenbach

Authenticity and excellence have little to do with the number of Catholics enrolled or the standard of our buildings and resources, but rather with the resolve within a school community to see the world with God's eyes and to embrace solidarity with the marginalised and the excluded.

The Gospel of the marginalised is where our credibility is discovered and revealed.

Pope Francis has consistently prayed for a Church of and for the poor:

- A Church which promotes service and compassionate engagement with the world as indispensable to the way we worship the Divine Essence of love, who stands with and for the poor.
- A Church focused on getting the Reign of God and its message of justice and truth into the world, rather than people into its ranks.
- A Church not so worried about how the world might change it, but rather, how it might strive to change the world.
- A Church which strives ceaselessly to tell the poor and the excluded ones that God loves them, and that the Gospel is good news for them as well.

The Reign of God that Jesus proclaimed ushered in a new world order built on justice, love and peace. The Hebrew word for peace is shalom.

Shalom refers not so much to an absence of violence but to a 'right order', a sense of equity and fairness in our dealings with each other.

There is no shalom if children go hungry, if human rights are ignored, there is no shalom – there is no shalom in a world indifferent to the common good.

To be collaborators in God's mission with Jesus, we must align our priorities with his and stand in solidarity with those who are blessed in the eyes of God: the peacemakers, the merciful, those who thirst for justice, as well as the poor, the powerless, the excluded, the marginalised and the suffering.

Everyone and every community are called to be instruments of God for the liberation and promotion of

the poor and to enable them to be fully part of society. This demands that we become attentive to the cry of the poor and come to their aid.

Pope Francis

...we must keep repeating it: without the poor there is no salvation, without the poor there is no Church, without the poor there is no Gospel.

Dom Pedro Casadaliga

Let us heed the wise counsel of Mahatma Gandhi:

I will give you a talisman:

Whenever you are in doubt, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest person whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]? Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him or her to control over his or her own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to freedom for the hungry and spiritually starving millions?

Then you will find your doubts melt away.

THE GOSPEL AND INCLUSION

Inclusion is at the heart of the Gospels, and exclusion, in its many shapes and forms, is the Gospel's greatest betrayal. The only thing that Jesus excluded was exclusion itself.

I was once with my family at an outdoor restaurant in Lima, Peru. The restaurant had a canvas outdoor dining barrier that separated its footpath space from those of neighbouring restaurants.

We had just finished the meal and were paying the bill. A young girl, who had been watching us eat from some distance away, came and sat on the ground just outside the barrier. Accompanying this young girl was a baby; it could have been her own child or possibly her little brother or sister.

When you eat in this restaurant, you are served a complimentary bowl of roasted corn as an appetiser, and you might be offered a bowl of peanuts- very cheap, easy and makes you thirsty. As we were a large group, we had several bowls of this 'cancha', as it is called in Spanish.

As we were about to leave, the young girl asked if she could have the leftover corn from our table.

To my great shame, I found two or three half-empty bowls of corn and handed them over the barrier to this young girl and her baby.

A couple of minutes later, the girl noticed that some of our soft drink bottles weren't completely empty and asked if she could have the dregs. This was too much for me, so I asked the waitress to bring a fresh soft drink so the girl and her baby could have one.

We left the restaurant that day, but the image of that young girl and the baby haunted me into the night. It still haunts me!

I profess to be a Christian, a follower of Jesus, who was a great 'includer' of people. The 'scandal' of Jesus' ministry was that he didn't go around handing out food; he didn't hand down bowls to people - he sat down at the table with them. He invited them to the table!

I was deeply ashamed that I had not invited this young girl to eat at our table. I went back to the restaurant the next two days at lunchtime, not for the food but rather hoping to find that young girl and her baby and invite them to the table.

At the core of Jesus' ministry was outreach to and inclusion of those at the margins of his society.

He touched the untouchables; he stood against systemic injustice and hypocrisy.

The entire ministry of Jesus was to render divine love and compassion visible, tangible, and concrete. He showed that God was not pleased with the blind following of laws and rituals, and of ritual purity. He entered the lives of the victims of these laws, whom he called the 'little ones': those with disabilities, the leper, the elderly, those who knew nothing of the law, those who mourn, the hungry, the persecuted, the widows.

The list of those included by Jesus goes on. All experienced his compassion and inclusion that led them to a new life.

Jesus declared suffering, in his society, seen as a sign of God's disapproval, to be a sign of God's presence. To declare these people 'children of God's kingdom' was a direct challenge to the religious establishment of the day.

Jesus's commitment to inclusion was a direct challenge to the religious establishment of the day. To declare lepers, tax-collectors, sinners, and the poor to be 'children of God's kingdom' is a decidedly political statement.

In the face of extremely complex rituals for cleanliness and purity, Jesus taught that one could be washed clean by baptism in water.

He taught his disciples to pray for the coming of God's Reign, which must surely have been interpreted as an act of subversion.

One could say that Jesus's commitment to inclusion ultimately cost him his life.

The parable of the Good Samaritan clearly shows that love and compassion trump laws or religious codes. It is not so much a teaching against hypocrisy as it is a highlighting of the consequences of excessive rule-following when what is most needed is compassion.

The greatest risk for Christian schools is softening or drifting from the core imperatives of their mission, as mandated by fidelity to the Gospel, and simply

becoming another 'fine' group of schools that embrace a tame, domesticated mission.

At the 2015 Global Congress on Catholic Education, Pope Francis spoke of the 'shame' of exclusion in education. He said that the greatest failure for an education is to educate within the walls of selective culture, the walls of a culture of security, the walls of a social class. He labels this type of education as shameful and divisive.

Francis's words can make us feel uncomfortable. The Gospel is rarely a source of comfort and should always unsettle and chastise us.

There is no perfectly inclusive school. We all face barriers that may hamper our efforts to be more inclusive. However, it is a challenge that we must never abandon.

Every school community should ask challenging questions related to the challenge of inclusion, such as:

- Which voices are listened to in this school?
- Who is welcomed? Who is not welcome?
- How are we defining success for our students?
- How are the less able, the less articulate, and the less presentable cared for?
- Do our fee structures and enrolment policies really encourage inclusion?
- Are we currently perceived in the community as inclusive or exclusive? How do we feel about this?

Some might say that it is easier to embrace a mission of radical inclusion or an option for the poor, in India, Africa and places where material poverty and exclusion are so visible.

We know that this is not true.

When tempted to think this way, however, let's remember the words of Mother Teresa:

Calcutta can be found all over the world if only we have eyes to see.

Our task, and that of our schools and communities, is to find Calcutta wherever we are.

To stand with the poor is to stand with the Divine. To listen to them is to hear the heartbeat of the Divine. To love them is to make Good News present in the world.

CONVERSION OF HEART

Conversion does not require rejection of one's religious belief system in favour of another.

Conversion is accepting responsibility for bringing the Divine vision for how the world should be into reality.

Conversion is a commitment to see with Divine eyes. This conversion of heart is a journey for all.

The movie *The Motorcycle Diaries* tells the true story of the early life of the revolutionary Ernesto (Che) Guevara.

As the young man recently finished his medical degree, Ernesto and a friend travelled around Latin America on an old motorbike. During his travels, he developed a deep appreciation for the plight of the poor in Latin America at that time, who were victims of structural injustice.

The movie is a study in change and conversion.

My favourite scene in the movie is when Ernesto celebrates his birthday with priests and nuns at a leper colony on the banks of the Amazon in Peru. As a doctor, he specialised in treating tropical diseases. The actual place where the lepers live is an island in the middle of a very wide river, separated from the world.

During the party, Ernesto goes outside and looks towards the island. In a moment of decision, he dives into the river and swims towards the lepers on the distant island. On the riverbank, his friends call him back because it is dark and dangerous, and Ernesto has suffered from chronic asthma all his life. On the shore of the island, however, the lepers are encouraging him to continue swimming towards them.

For me, this is a wonderful image of conversion, of movement towards 'the other', of letting go of the 'self' and baptism into solidarity with the poor. He reached the island, was embraced by the lepers, and his life was never the same. He has made his option; he is with the poor; he has swum the river.

The journey of conversion is one that St Oscar Romero and Pope Francis himself have also made. In their early lives, both men were conservative, legalistic defenders of the status quo in the relationship between the Church and the State.

In the case of Romero, it was the persecution of his people, culminating in the assassination of Fr Rutilio Grande, that galvanised his 'conversion'. No longer could he be a bystander when people were being killed for standing with the poor.

After his conversion, Romero warned that:

... a church that doesn't provoke any crises, a Gospel that doesn't unsettle, a word of God that doesn't get under anyone's skin, isn't really the Gospel but rather, very nice, pious considerations that don't bother anyone!

Similarly, Pope Francis, who was the conservative head of the Jesuits in Argentina at a young age, failed to stand with two confreres who were persecuted due to their choice to live and work with the poor. At one point, Fr Bergoglio demanded that these two priests abandon this stance and return to traditional roles within the Congregation. They both refused and suffered horribly.

Francis referred to his process of conversion to the poor as 'untying the knots'.

The knots of excessive rule-following and prioritisation of the established order over the plight of the marginalised. He may have been referring to his own journey when Francis once reflected:

The word "solidarity" is a little worn and, at times, poorly understood, but it refers to more than a few sporadic acts of generosity. It presumes the creation of a new heart of compassion....

And so, friends, what are the 'knots' that we must untie to free ourselves for greater commitment to the marginalised, the voiceless and those who must be included?

EDUCATION FOR LIBERATION AND RESPONSIBILITY

At the end of apartheid, Nelson Mandela warned his people that they were not yet free, that they had merely achieved the possibility of being free. I think he was implying that true freedom is something that must be actively claimed by each person, the freedom to react, choose and engage with the world on their own terms.

Similarly, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire argued that education must help every individual regain the right to name the world they live in. It must equip and challenge people to critique their reality and develop skills to make meaning for themselves.

We know that, for many people, meaning in key areas of their lives is packaged and imposed by their dominant cultures. They lack the skills to question these versions of the world and how they are to live. They are passive consumers of other people's priorities and definitions of what constitutes a happy, successful, and meaningful life.

As Michael Warren described this reality many years ago when he said that:

It is not the culture of the people, but the culture concocted for the people's consumption!

A liberating education will help our young people look deeply into the world's recipes for success, happiness, and wholeness, and be selective and critical about what they accept.

It will challenge them to reject versions of the world that define success solely in terms of money, accumulation of things and an overemphasis on status and security.

A liberating education will encourage young people to live independently of the approval or good opinion of others; to unshackle themselves from unexamined opinions and inherited prejudices.

The most radical spirituality is living as a free human being. And that freedom is ours to choose. Freedom cannot be bought. Freedom cannot be sold to us. Freedom doesn't come prepackaged. There is no right expression of this freedom.

If in need of clarity about the wisdom or ignorance of an action, reflect: if what you are about to say or do

will cause harm to yourself and or others, stop. On the other hand, if it elevates you and others, cultivate it.

Alan Clements

Our dominant cultures tell us that our highest calling is to be consumers, that happiness can be bought, and that products can fulfil us and satisfy our deepest human needs.

It can sometimes appear that two Gospels are in competition for attention and allegiance. Both make statements about the ultimate meaning of human life. One Gospel reveals people as replaceable and marketable commodities, whereas the other, opposed to the first, reveals persons as irreplaceable and uniquely free beings.

Fr Jim DiGiacomo put it so cleverly:

Christianity encourages us to love people and use things, whereas a consumer culture can encourage us to use people and love things.

This conflict can distort the view of what it means to be truly free in contemporary society. Young people stress their need for individualism and freedom, but are often unconsciously slaves to fashion, advertising and the mandates of consumerism.

I once witnessed an interview with a young Muslim woman who chose to wear a veil and a moderate form of Islamic dress to her classes at Sydney University. When the interviewer implied that her freedom was being restricted by wearing the dress, she replied that she felt truly free because she chose to dress in accordance with her beliefs. She added that she pitied the lack of freedom she saw among her fellow students, who seemed slaves to fashion and peer pressure.

There are some people who are held fast by slavery; however, there are many others who hold fast to slavery.

Seneca

The Statue of Liberty is so cherished and revered in the United States.

However, I once heard someone say that another monument should be built alongside the Statue of Liberty, a Statue of Responsibility!

Freedom finds its highest expression in service.

I think that he was reminding us that freedom and service are inextricably linked, and with the privilege of liberty comes social responsibility.

Responsibility (response-ability), the obligation of freedom, and the invitation to participation and involvement; individuals as ends, not as means and functions.

David Lorimer

Freedom and service are inextricably linked, and with the privilege of liberty comes social responsibility.

We all must come to see that the opportunities they enjoy through the good fortune of our birth are not a license to do whatever we please, but a vehicle for service to others and doing what we must do to build a fairer, kinder, more just world.

As Fr Pedro Arrupe said:

Today's prime educational objective must be to form 'men and women for others'...who cannot even conceive of love of God which does not include love for the least of their neighbours.

Our liberty should become a means, not an end. We ask the question: liberty for what?

Pope Francis puts it this way:

Perhaps it is thought that liberty is to do whatever one wishes. This isn't liberty! Liberty means to be able to reflect on what we do, to know how to appreciate what is good and what is bad, and to always choose the good.

Our young people should learn that, in the end, it is not how much we have done in our lives that matters most. Rather, it is whether we have made a positive difference in the lives of others and contributed to the stock of the world's goodness.

You are not here to merely make a living. You are here to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world, and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand.

President Woodrow Wilson

A great danger for education is that it becomes solely focused on helping young people fit into an economy. We prepare our students for life, not merely teach them to make a living.

We must prepare the young to make their contribution to the future, not just as cogs in a cycle of production and consumption, but as citizens, lovers, agents of change, and contributors to the world.

These messages were beautifully conveyed to me by a young girl in Calcutta.

Loretto Day School is a highly prestigious girls' school in Calcutta. It is one of the most authentic Catholic schools I know, where, ironically, very few Catholics are enrolled. Sr. Cyril Mooney, the dynamic and charismatic past Principal, always referred to her school as a 'resource centre for the poor.' For generations, this prestigious school, with an enrolment of 1500 girls, has been the school of choice for many of the well-heeled people of Calcutta, regardless of their religious affiliation. Under Sr. Cyril, half pay high fees and half pay nothing. This latter group are street kids, the poorest of the poor. They all wear school uniforms, and all are equal in this remarkable place. But that's not all! In this school, all the children, whether they are well-to-do, the future leaders of India, or children of street sweepers, every day are required to teach street kids; kids from the villages and railway stations, kids who have nothing. It is compulsory, regardless of caste or family background.

I remember asking a very eloquent school leader, a high-caste young Hindu lady of about 15, why her dad, who could afford any type of education, chose to send her to Loretto Sealdah. At this school, she had to engage with people of a caste and family background very different from her own, in ways that ran contrary to her caste's beliefs and customs. She replied very eloquently, 'My father sends me to this school so that I can receive an education, not just attain a qualification!'

Integral to an education for that girl and her family was the call to be an agent of change, to take responsibility for challenging dehumanising structures, and to commit to the liberation of all.

Teaching skills without offering the young a vision of a better future is merely training.

We are not engaged in Catholic training!

Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, a previous Superior General of the Jesuits, described what we hope for in all graduates from Catholic schools:

They will be well-rounded, intellectually competent, open to growth, religious, loving, and committed to doing justice in generous service to the people of God.

They will be people who are competent and compassionate, whose conscience is sensitive to the demands of the Gospel, and people of peace and justice, committed to be agents of change in the world, which recognises how widespread injustice is, and how pervasive are the forces of oppression, selfishness, and consumerism.

There is only one true vocation for everybody—to find the way to yourself. You might end as a poet, lunatic, prophet, or criminal—that was not your affair; ultimately, it was of no account. Your affair was to discover your own destiny and live it out wholly and resolutely within yourself. Anything else was merely a half-life, an attempt at evasion, an escape into the ideals of the masses, complacency, and fear of his inner soul.

Hermann Hesse

In some classic stories, the hero is the person who went out to slay a dragon that was threatening the hero's village. How do we become heroes, and what do we have to slay to make our contribution to the world?

The Greek roots of the word suggest that the hero is one who can choose. The hero interprets life through her/his own experience. The journey leads to questioning and interrogating the culture one lives in. Who am I? What is valuable? How do I find peace and happiness? What does it mean to live justly? The hero is suspicious of easy answers that are readily on offer in the dominant culture. Our schools are in the business of creating heroes! An exciting thought!

The heroic life does not require us to become something greater than we are. But it does require us to be faithful to our own authentic path.

The hero is someone who has given his or her life to something bigger than himself or herself. To do this, we must slay the dragon of envy, the dragon of fearing to be different, the dragon that tells us that near enough is good enough, the dragon that tells us that it's OK to live a copied, inauthentic life.

EDUCATION, MEANING AND FULLNESS OF LIFE

Life is a garden, not a road. We enter and exit through the same gate. Wandering, where we go matters less than what we notice.

Kurt Vonnegut

I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.

Jesus of Nazareth

A turning point in my career as a teacher came many years ago when I learned that a former student had committed suicide. This girl had been in my religion classes for two years. I remember her as a pretty, intelligent girl, but somewhat of a loner with a rather troubled home life. At the age of 21, having just graduated from university, she drove herself to a quiet park, locked the doors of her car and ended her life.

Tragedies such as this can lead us to ask questions about the education we are offering the young:

- What does it matter that we teach young people to read, write and do arithmetic, when we can't teach them vital lessons on life's sacredness, meaning and purpose?
- To what avail were my religion lessons when this girl didn't pick up a sense of the beauty of her own personhood?

It often seems that formal education does little to prepare our students for the real issues, decisions, and dilemmas they will face throughout their life journeys.

Education is not preparation for life; education is life itself.

John Dewey

We risk teaching our young everything in the world except the most essential things: how to live, be happy, and find peace. We assume that young people learn this by osmosis. But when we look around at our fragmented world, it doesn't appear to be working that well by osmosis alone.

As the poet Yeats once said, "Education is not filling a bucket but lighting a fire." Surely this fire should translate into a passion for life, meaning and purpose!

It's not the answers we teach them to give, but rather it's the moral questions we teach them to ask, that are

the measure of the spiritual leadership we give to the emerging generation.

Joan Chittister

The education we provide should present our young with deep life questions and encourage a lifelong quest for answers that will change and evolve as they journey through life. These questions address our universal yearning for connection with something bigger.

- Who am I?
- What is my life's purpose?
- What constitutes a good, worthwhile and full life?
- How do I come to know peace and happiness?
- Is there meaning in suffering?
- How do I approach death?

When was the last time that you saw a curriculum built around these and similar questions?

It can appear that much of the content of education is geared towards helping our young people answer questions they are not asking and probably will never ask. This can lead many to discard the lessons they have received at school, the way they discard their school uniforms upon finishing.

In a crowded curriculum, how do we prepare the young to live fully, be happy, use their freedom for the good of all, and make their contribution to the future?

The following is attributed to a Holocaust survivor who later became a school principal. Addressing the staff on her first day at a new school, she said,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes have seen what no person should witness. Gas chambers built by learned engineers and children poisoned by educated physicians. Infants killed by trained nurses. Women and babies were shot and killed by high school and college graduates. Oh, I am suspicious of education. My only request is to help your students be human. Our efforts should never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, or an educated Eichmann. Reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic are only important when they help make our students human.

We will only ever be half-educated until we have acquired a sense of human dignity and worth, an appreciation of life, the knowledge of how to use our limited time wisely, and the determination to leave the world a better place for our having been here.

Ours is a time when purposelessness, disconnection and loneliness abound and define the lives of many. Our world is so connected electronically, but can be so lacking in human relationships. Instagram, Facebook, and mobile phones enable us to stay connected, yet, in all probability, we live in a time when human beings have never been less connected.

It can be a bleak world if one is subjected to incessant, unfiltered media and is focused on keeping up with others. In our 'information age,' our young are overloaded and often drown in information. I once heard this referred to as an epidemic of 'infobesity'!

To borrow from Aldous Huxley, we hope that the technological progress that we witness in our world is not merely providing us with more efficient means of going backwards.

Where is the knowledge that is lost in information,
where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge?

TS Eliot

A liberating education will help young people to identify what is of lasting importance and usefulness in their lives. It will help distil life wisdom from the incessant, unfiltered cascade of information that bombards us and seeks to keep us restless.

The land of too much information is where wonder
often goes to die!

(Someone wise)

Life's most urgent question is what are you doing for
others?

Martin Luther King

The Christian Gospel differs from the messages of many of our dominant cultures in asserting that we can experience a meaningful existence by looking beyond our individual needs and concerns.

I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I
do know: The only ones among you who will be happy
are those who have sought and found how to serve.

Albert Schweitzer

We teach that life is most meaningful when it is lived for others, that purpose in life is most profoundly experienced through contribution to the common good. The door to happiness always opens outwards!

Famous anthropologist Margaret Mead was asked by a student what she considered to be the first sign of civilisation in a culture. The student expected Mead to talk about fishhooks, clay pots, or grinding stones.

But no. Mead said that the first sign of civilisation in an ancient culture was a femur (thighbone) that had been broken and then healed. Mead explained that in the animal kingdom, if you break your leg, you die. You cannot run from danger, get to the river for a drink or hunt for food. You are meat for prowling beasts. No animal survives a broken leg long enough for the bone to heal.

A broken femur that has healed is evidence that someone has taken the time to stay with the one who fell, bound up the wound, carried the person to safety, and tended the person through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilisation starts, Mead said. We are at our best when we serve others.

Compassion is a cornerstone of civilisation.

It was Tolstoy who reminded us that to feel pain is to be alive. But to feel the pain of others is to be human.

Our young people should learn that, in the end, it is not how much we have done in our lives that matters most. Rather, it is whether we have made a positive difference in the lives of others and contributed to the stock of the world's goodness.

As Mother Teresa said,

It is not how much we do, but how much love we put into the doing. It is not how much we give, but how much love we put in the giving. We need not do great things, but small things with great love.

May I have the courage today.
To live the life that I would love.
To postpone my dream no longer
But to do at last what I came here for
And waste my heart on fear no more.

John O'Donohue

Our greatest fear is that we reach the point of death only to find that we have never fully lived.

We pray that we will be spared the great tragedy of only living half-lives, wasting the one opportunity that we have.

Do not allow your fire to go out, spark by irreplaceable spark in the hopeless swamps of the not quite, the not yet, and the not at all.

Do not let the hero in your soul perish in lonely frustration for the life you deserved and have never been able to reach. The world you desire can be won. It exists. It is real. It is possible. It is yours.

Ayn Rand

Philosopher David Lorimer describes the common experience of people who have a near-death experience:

There is a universal decline in the fear of death, accompanied by the conviction that a life after death is a reality. There is an increased desire to live in the present, to appreciate beauty and nature; a concern for and an acceptance of others as they are, together with an emphasis on the values of love, compassion, and giving; a search for wisdom and spiritual understanding; and finally, a decreased concern for material wealth and status.

Shouldn't we all aspire to live with these convictions? We want to engage in life as active participants, not passive observers.

There should always be a healthy tension between the life we have settled for and the desires that still call us. In this sense, our desires are the messengers of our un-lived life, calling us to attention and action while we still have time here to explore fields where the treasure dwells!

John O'Donohue

Writer Norman Cousins suggests that the tragedy of life is not death, but what we let die inside of us while we live.

These are the words of an 85-year-old man, who learned that he was going to die and that his time was short:

If I had my life to live over again, I'd try to make more mistakes next time. I wouldn't try to be so perfect.

I would relax more. I'd limber up. I'd be sillier than I've been on this trip. In fact, I know very few things that I would take so seriously, I'd be crazier. I'd be less hygienic.

I'd take more chances, I'd take more trips, I'd climb more mountains, I'd swim more rivers, I'd watch more sunsets, I'd go more places I've never been to. I'd eat more ice cream and fewer beans.

I'd have more actual troubles and fewer imaginary ones.

You see, I was one of those people who lived safely and sensibly and sanely hour after hour and day after day. Oh, I've had my moments, and if I had it to do all over again, I'd have more of those moments. In fact, I'd try to have nothing but beautiful moments – moment by moment by moment.

I've been one of those people who never went anywhere without a thermometer, a hot water bottle, a gargle, a raincoat, and a parachute. If I had it to do all over again, I'd travel lighter next time.

And finally, he says,

If I had it to do all over again, I'd start barefoot earlier in the spring and stay that way later in the fall. I'd ride more merry-go-rounds, I'd watch more sunrises, and I'd play with more children, if I had my life to live over again. But you see, I don't.

We have two lives.
And the second begins when you realise you only have one.

Mário Raul de Moraes Andrade

The Dalai Lama once remarked that,

Many people sacrifice their health to make money. Then they sacrifice money to recuperate their health. And then they are so anxious about the future that they do not enjoy the present. As a result, they do not live in the present or the future; they live as if they are never going to die and then die having never really lived.

What a tragedy, the body that will rot is pampered, and the soul that lives forever is neglected.

Al Ghazali

There is a story about an Indian Maharaja who would engage in a bizarre morning ritual.

Every day, immediately after waking up, he would celebrate his own funeral, complete with music and flowers. All the while, he would chant, "I have lived fully, I have lived fully, I have lived fully".

What this Maharaja is doing is connecting to his mortality and his life every day, so that he will live each day as if it were his last. His ritual is a very wise one, reminding him that time slips through our hands like grains of sand, and that the time to live life fully is not tomorrow but today.

Perhaps no one has so beautifully expressed the importance of living fully in the present moment as Ralph Waldo Emerson:

These roses under my window make no reference to former roses or to better ones; they are for what they are; they exist with God today. There is no time for them. There is simply the rose; it is perfect in every moment of its existence. Before a leaf-bud has burst, its whole life acts; in the full-blown flower, there is no more; in the leafless root, there is no less. Its nature is satisfied, and it satisfies nature, in all moments alike. There is no time for it. But people postpone or remember; they do not live in the present, but with a reverted eye laments the past, or, heedless of the riches that surround them, stand on tiptoe to foresee the future. They cannot be happy and strong until they too live with nature in the present, above time.

As golf legend Ben Hogan said,

As you walk down the fairway of life, you must smell the roses, for you only get to play one round.

In the end, when we look at our lives, perhaps the questions will be simple:

- Did I live fully?
- Did I love well?

The ancient Egyptians believed that upon their deaths, they would be asked by the gods two questions, and their answers would determine whether they could continue their journey in the afterlife. The first question was, "Did you bring joy?" The second was, "Did you find joy?" These goals then become a sacred charge in life and the only way to obtain eternal happiness.

That the silent presence of your death would call your life to attention. Wake you up to how scarce your time is and to the urgency to become free and equal to the call of your destiny. That you would gather yourself and decide carefully how you can now live the life you would love.

John O'Donohue

We should pray that we reach the point of death with a contented smile rather than a regretful sigh! Pray that we will not say 'please give me more time' but 'thank you', just as a guest thanks her host at the door, about to leave after a wonderful celebration.

Write it on your heart that every day is the best day of the year. He is rich who owns the day, and no one owns the day who allows it to be invaded with fret and anxiety. Finish every

day and be done with it. You have done what you could. Some blunders and absurdities, no doubt, crept in. Forget them as soon as you can. Tomorrow is a new day; Begin it well and serenely, with too high a spirit to be cumbered with your old nonsense. This new day is too dear, with its hopes and invitations, to waste a moment on the yesterdays.

Ralph Waldo Emerson

THE ROLE AND VOCATION OF EDUCATOR

Ours is a profession that enjoys privilege and responsibility above all others. Through our belief in and education of the young, we touch and co-create the future.

The well-known former head of a large multinational corporation, Lee Iacocca, once said,

In a completely rational society, the best of us would aspire to be educators, and the rest of us would have to settle for something less. Because passing civilisation along from one generation to the next ought to be the highest honour and highest responsibility anyone could have.

We are laying the foundations of something whose completion we may never see. Planting seeds of trees whose shade we may never enjoy.

The one who plants trees, knowing that he or she will never sit in their shade, has at least started to understand the meaning of life.

Rabindranath Tagore

The souls of the young dwell in the house of tomorrow, and they will be the architects and builders of a future for the world.

American educator Felix Adler spoke powerfully of our privilege when he wrote:

We are laying the foundations of a mighty edifice, whose completion shall not be seen in our day, no, nor in centuries upon centuries after us. But happy are we indeed if we can contribute even the least towards so high a call. Up then, and let us do our part faithfully and well. Friends, our children's children will hold our memories dearer for the work which we begin this hour.

The ultimate test we will face is to live in a future created by our own children. The kind of world they commit themselves to will arise from the values and formation we offer them.

What will our children do in the morning if they don't see us fly?

Rumi

There are little eyes upon you,
and they're watching night and day.

There are little ears that quickly
take in every word you say.
There are little hands all eager
to do anything you do.
And a little child who's dreaming
of the day he'll be like you.

You're the little fellow's idol.
You're the wisest of the wise.
In his little mind about you
no suspicions ever rise.
He believes in you devoutly,
holds all that you say and do.
He will say and do things your way
when he's grown up, just as you do.

There's a wide-eyed little fellow
who believes you're always right.
And his eyes are always open
And he watches day and night.
You are setting an example,
every day in all you do,
for the little child who's waiting,
to grow up to be like you.

Anonymous

Much work has been done in recent years to professionalise the role of teachers. We have registration processes and checks and balances over core competencies and currency of skills. All this is very important and helpful.

However, the opposite of professional is amateur.

Sadly, many take this term to mean someone inept or incompetent. However, the correct meaning of the term 'amateur' is someone who undertakes their task with enthusiasm, for the love of it, because they are devoted to it.

Amid all the professionalism, should not all educators recover something of the amateur as well?

Not all educators in our schools need to believe the same things, worship in the same communities, or see religion in the same way. We don't all need to be of the same faith, or teach the subject called 'Religious Education'.

Regardless of where we are in our lives and spiritual journeys, we all have one thing in common. We are all teachers of life and spirituality.

Some of us will have the privilege of exploring this journey in classrooms through words and conversations. Others will have to rely solely on the witness and example they give of these priorities in their own lives as the primary means by which they contribute to the spiritual future of our youth.

This is no less powerful and is of utmost importance.

What we model, what we value, what we question, and where we lead the young through our personal commitments in life will determine the values, visions, and answers we get from the next generation.

Once, while alighting from a train, Mahatma Gandhi was asked if he had a message for his followers. He famously replied that his life was his message. He challenged us to 'be the change we wish to see'.

Albert Schweitzer once suggested that there were three ways an individual could change the world. The first was by example. The second was by example. The third was by example.

Should any educator expect that who they are, what they stand for and how they live their lives would not be the most important messages that their students receive?

In our profession, the personal can never be separated from the professional. The message cannot be separated from the medium.

There is no greater legacy to leave than a life well lived.

Through our witness and example, we become the beacon that guides others through the darkness, not by coercion but by inspiring a shared vision of what can be achieved together.

The hero is one who kindles a great light in the world, who sets up blazing torches in the dark streets of life for men to see by. The saint is the person who walks through the world's dark paths, themselves a light.

Felix Adler

The call to sainthood is a journey beyond the reach of all but the most exalted among us. However, all leaders are called to be heroes, shining the light of authentic and well-lived lives for emerging generations.

All who work in educational settings are 'educators', and the witness and efforts of all contribute to the formation of emerging generations and, subsequently, to the making of our shared future.

As significant adults in their lives, the way we live our lives and the way we don't live our lives has an indelible impact on the students we teach.

None of us is perfect. If we wait for perfection before embarking on a leadership journey, we will never make our contribution.

We will be like the person referred to by Rabindranath Tagore, who lamented:

I have spent many days stringing and unstringing my instrument while the song I came to sing remains unsung.

Fortunately, our human condition gives us one huge concession: we don't have to be perfect, just the best we can!

Not perfect but truly authentic!
No one can ask more of educators!
No one can ask more of you!

The old teacher's adage says: They don't care how much you know until they know how much you care!

Think back to the teacher that you remember most fondly from your time at school.

I would hazard a guess that the teacher that you remember with most affection is someone who, in some way, went out of their way to engage with you at a deeply human level. Someone who believed in you, and, through that belief, touched your humanity.

Good education cannot be reduced to a series of techniques; it comes from the love and integrity of parents and educators.

Early in my career, I imagined that good teaching depended upon programs, strategies, policies, and perfectly designed lessons. I believed that if we organised

carefully enough and worked hard enough, learning and growth would automatically follow.

However, the years have taught me a quieter truth.

The real work of an educator is not to manufacture success but to create the conditions in which growth can happen.

We must be present enough to notice what is already trying to emerge within a young person.

We do not form young lives so much as accompany them into being.

Carl Jung put it this way:

An understanding heart is everything in a teacher and cannot be highly enough esteemed. One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our humanity. Warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child.

Schools can so easily become places of noise. Targets, timetables, data, comparisons, endless urgency. In the rush, we can begin to treat students as projects to be managed rather than mysteries to be encountered.

Every child who walks into a classroom is more than a bundle of outcomes waiting to be fulfilled. Each carries an unseen story, a fragile hope, a hidden possibility waiting for someone patient and present enough to notice.

This is why presence matters more than any program.

Silence matters. Listening matters. Slowing down matters.

In the stillness between lessons, in the unhurried conversation after class, in the gentle encouragement offered at just the right moment, lives quietly change direction.

Presence in a classroom says to a young person: "I see you. I am here. You matter."

From that simple attention, everything else grows – confidence, curiosity, courage, and compassion.

We do not have to force inspiration in our students; it awakens naturally when they feel safe and known.

We do not have to manufacture motivation; it arises when learning connects with their real lives.

We do not have to pretend to be perfect models; we simply need to be authentic human beings willing to walk beside them.

This is education in ordinary clothes. Not grand theories, but deep attention. Not louder instruction, but deeper listening and attention.

To serve the growth of another human being.

To understand that every interaction is a creative act, every student is a sacred trust, and every ordinary school day is an opportunity to practice reverence for the unfolding of a life.

So now, I trust the quiet way. I trust the patient teacher, the compassionate leader, the school community that values kindness as highly as achievement.

I trust that there is an intelligence at work in each young person far greater than our plans, and that our deepest responsibility is simply to align with it.

Perhaps that is the heart of our vocation: learning to be still enough, humble enough, and present enough to hear what each child and each colleague is asking of us next.

And then, respond with love, gratitude and courage.

The dream begins most of the time with a teacher who believes in you, who tugs and pushes and leads you on to the next plateau, sometimes even poking you with a sharp stick called truth.

Dan Rather

I was educated by the Christian Brothers until the end of Year 10. To be honest, I wasn't a particularly successful student. When I moved to a state high school for Years 11 and 12, my priorities lay elsewhere. Like many young people growing up near the coast, I had my world revolve around the local beach culture. School was something I attended sporadically and with little enthusiasm. I lacked motivation, direction, and confidence.

When Year 12 ended, I had neither matriculated to university nor gained entry into any tertiary course. I felt like a failure. Looking back, I suspect many others would have agreed with that assessment.

For the next six months, I lived on unemployment benefits. It was a challenging time. Many of my friends had begun university, and I watched them come and go during holidays and semester breaks while I remained stuck. My days were largely spent reading Wilbur Smith novels and surfing.

Eventually, I found work in a bank. There was nothing wrong with the job; it was secure and respectable. But deep down, I knew it wasn't where I belonged. Then, one Saturday morning, everything changed.

I was walking down the main street of my hometown when I ran into a Christian Brother who had taught me during my junior years. Brother Jim stopped to talk and asked me what I was doing with my life. Then he asked a question that altered the entire course of my future.

"Wayne," he said, "have you ever thought about becoming a teacher?"
I was stunned.

"Me, Brother? A teacher? Don't you know I failed my final exams? I didn't matriculate. I couldn't get into university?"

Brother Jim smiled warmly.

"Wayne, I know a place in Sydney where we used to train Brothers. We still do, although there aren't many entering these days. They're taking laypeople now. Perhaps if I put in a good word, we might be able to get you a start. I think you'd make a fine teacher."

A few weeks later, after learning that a transfer was likely in my bank job, I contacted Brother Jim and asked whether his offer still stood. He made a phone call, and an interview was arranged at Mount St Mary College in Strathfield. I was accepted on probation.

The rest, as they say, is history.

As I reflect on that encounter all these years later, I am struck by a simple truth: we never fully know the difference we make in another person's life.

For reasons I still cannot entirely explain, Brother Jim saw something in me that I could not see in myself. At a time when I viewed myself as a disappointment, he saw possibility. At a time when I had largely given up on my own potential, he believed in it. More importantly, he voiced that belief.

Those few words changed everything.

As educators, parents, and mentors, we are often tempted to underestimate the significance of small conversations. Yet it is frequently the casual encounter, the unexpected word of encouragement, the moment when we express genuine belief in a young person that becomes a turning point in their lives.

The greatest gift we can offer young people is not simply knowledge or opportunity; it is the conviction that they are capable of more than they currently imagine. Sometimes all it takes is one person who sees beyond present circumstances and speaks to the possibilities waiting to emerge.

Every day in our schools, classrooms, and communities, we have opportunities to do just that.

What a sobering responsibility.

What a magnificent privilege.

This is the story of a primary school teacher. Her name was Mrs Thompson.

As she stood in front of her fifth-grade class on the very first day of school, she told the children a lie. Like most teachers, she looked at her students and said that she loved them all the same. But that was impossible because there in the front row, slumped in his seat, was a little boy named Teddy Stoddart.

Mrs Thompson had watched Teddy the year before and noticed that he didn't play well with the other children. His clothes were messy, and he needed a bath constantly. Teddy could be unpleasant. It got to the point that Mrs Thompson took some delight in marking his papers with a broad red pen and making bold X's and then putting a big F at the top of his paper.

At the school where Mrs Thompson taught, she was required to review each child's past records, and she put Teddy's off until last. However, when she reviewed his file, she was in for a surprise.

Teddy's first-grade teacher wrote, 'Teddy is a bright child with a ready laugh. He does his work neatly, and he has good manners; he is a joy to be around.'

His second-grade teacher wrote, 'Teddy is an excellent student. Well-liked by his classmates, but he is troubled because his mother has a terminal illness and life at home must be a struggle.'

The third-grade teacher wrote, 'His mother's death has been hard on him. He tries to do his best, but his father doesn't show much interest, and his home life will soon affect him if steps aren't taken.'

Teddy's fourth-grade teacher wrote, 'Teddy's withdrawn and doesn't show much interest in school. He doesn't have many friends, and sometimes he even sleeps in class.'

By now, Mrs Thompson realised the problem, and she was ashamed of herself.

She felt even worse when her students brought her Christmas presents wrapped in beautiful ribbons and bright paper, except for Teddy. His present was clumsily wrapped in heavy brown paper that he got from the grocery bags.

Mrs Thompson took pains to open it in the middle of the other presents. Some of the children started laughing when she found a rhinestone bracelet with some stones missing and a bottle one-quarter full of perfume. But she stifled her children's laughter when she exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was, putting it on and dabbing some of the perfume on her wrists.

Teddy Stoddart stayed after school that day just long enough to say, 'Mrs Thompson, today you smelled just like my Mum used to.' After the children left, she cried for at least an hour.

On that very day, she quit teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic and began to teach children instead. Mrs Thompson paid particular attention to Teddy. As she worked with him, his mind seemed to come alive; the more she encouraged him, the faster he responded. By the end of the year, Teddy had become one of the smartest children in the class.

A year later, she found a note under the door from Teddy telling her she was the best teacher he had ever had in his whole life. Six years went by before she got another note from Teddy. He then wrote that he had finished high school third in his class and that she was still the best teacher he had ever had.

Four years after that, she got another letter saying that, while things had been tough at times, he'd stayed in school, stuck with it, and would soon graduate from college with the highest of honours. He assured Mrs Thompson that she was still the very best and favourite teacher he ever had in his whole life.

Then four more years passed, and yet another letter came. This time, he explained that after he got his bachelor's degree, he decided to go a little further. The letter explained that she was still the best and favourite teacher he ever had, but now his name was a little longer. The letter was signed Theodore F Stoddart, MD.

But the story doesn't end there.

You see, there was yet another letter that Spring. Teddy said he'd met a girl and was going to marry her. He explained that his father had died a couple of years ago and asked whether Mrs Thompson would sit in the place at the wedding that was usually reserved for the mother of the groom.

Of course, Mrs Thompson did and guess what? She wore that bracelet, the one with several rhinestones missing, and made sure she was wearing the perfume Teddy remembered his mother wearing on their last Christmas together.

They hugged each other, and Dr Stoddart whispered in Mrs Thompson's ear, 'Thank you so much for making me feel important and showing me that I could make a difference.' Mrs Thompson, with tears in her eyes, whispered back, 'Teddy, you have it all wrong. You were the one who taught me that I could make a difference. I didn't know how to teach until I met you.'

Never forget that our schools are filled with hundreds of 'Teddy Stoddarts' who need our attention and care to reach their full potential.

Remember also that, for the child in your care who may not be so easy to like, we may just be his or her Mrs Thompson.

SOME THOUGHTS ON LEADERSHIP

Leadership cannot be conferred through appointment, accolades, or titles. It is recognised and followed because of character, vision, and actions.

The shallowest form of leadership relies on titles to assert authority and influence. At best, a title may buy you a little time to show who you really are.

Respect, influence, and authority cannot simply be claimed or announced; they must be demonstrated and earned through consistent actions and behaviours.

In her own inimitable way, Margaret Thatcher once reportedly said, 'Being a leader is like being a lady! If you need to tell someone that you are one, you probably aren't.'

Leadership is a choice, not a position. Anyone, regardless of their official role or title, can lead by example through their actions, integrity, values, and how they treat others.

Wonderful things happen when leaders' lives become their message.

True leaders embark on their journey not with a quest for recognition or authority, but with a commitment to a cause greater than themselves, driven by a deep desire to make a meaningful difference.

The true measure of leadership is not quantified by the achievements of the leader themselves but by the success and growth of those they guide.

Leadership transforms when people are inspired to reach higher, dream bigger, and achieve more than they thought possible.

The real leader will ensure that all whom they serve know that their contribution, however humble or 'down the food chain', is vital to the realisation of the community's noblest goals.

To handle yourself, use your head; to handle others,
use your heart.

Eleanor Roosevelt

The essence of leadership lies in inspiring, empowering, and uplifting others through authenticity, humility, and a commitment to a cause greater than oneself.

American Priest Theodore Hesburgh reminded us that the very essence of leadership is having a vision. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet!

It must be clear what a leader stands for, and this must align with the highest vision for our communities.

The first task for a faith leader is to envision the type of world we wish to leave behind.

Through our words and witness, we must make bold claims about the future of our world, advocating for justice, how we should relate to one another, and the true meaning of freedom, meaning, and purpose. The leader speaks for the voiceless and the excluded.

We might espouse the 'Vans' approach to leadership.

The catchphrase for the brand Vans is 'Off the Wall'. A leader challenges their community to get our values, priorities, and principles off the walls of our offices and classrooms and be active in the life and fabric of our community.

Leadership is fundamentally about inspiration. As John Quincy Adams once articulated: 'If your actions inspire others to dream more, learn more, do more, and become more, you are a leader.'

In faith settings, the quality of leadership will be measured by the willingness and capacity to inspire, engage, and enlist others in a mission that emanates from God's desire to offer the fullness of life to all humanity.

Martin Luther King Jr began his iconic address at the Lincoln Memorial with the words: 'I have a dream!' Notice that he didn't say, 'I have a strategic plan!' While strategic plans are important, true leaders must be able to dream and inspire others to dream alongside them.

Often, we may be blessed with a podium and words with which to inspire, but more frequently, what is required are humble witness and selfless example. The irony is that we inspire more through our authenticity and humility than through dazzling skills or eloquence.

Leadership is about influence. It's about one life touching another, sparking a flame that lights the way for many. The best leaders are remembered not for the heights

they reached alone but for the heights they helped others to reach. They instil in their followers not just the ambition to achieve but the wisdom to aspire to be leaders themselves.



In the heart of every good leader beats the spirit of service.

This service is not born of obligation but of genuine love and compassion for others. Such leadership views power not as a command, but as an opportunity to uplift and serve.

It recognises that the greatest impact is made not by asserting dominance, but by demonstrating unwavering support and dedication to the betterment of others. This ethos transforms a leader into a beacon of hope and guidance, inspiring others to embody the principles of servitude and love in their own journey towards leadership.

By living a life of service, rather than merely preaching it, Jesus demonstrated that true leadership is not about elevating oneself but about lifting others up. He challenged the conventional paradigms of his time, calling into question the practices of those who used their positions for personal gain, and instead, laid the foundation for leadership rooted in compassion, service, and selflessness.

Our actions must align with our values, and our words must reflect our beliefs. Integrity builds trust and credibility, essential elements for creating a culture of excellence and accountability within our schools.

Leaders can take inspiration from the words of George Bernard Shaw:

This is the true joy in life.... being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one.

Be a force of nature, instead of a feverish, selfish little clod of ailments and grievances, complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.

I believe my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do whatever I can for it. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the more I contribute, the more I live.

Life is no "brief candle" to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I have hold of for the moment, and I want

to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

SOME THOUGHTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AT GRADUATION

Today, as we celebrate excellence and effort and bid farewell to many young people who stand at the threshold of a new chapter in their lives, we gather in a spirit of gratitude, reflection, and hope.

Alongside the pride we feel, it's only natural for us, the adults in their lives, to feel a little nervous too. After all, the greatest test we face is to live in a future created by our own children.

The kind of world they create will be shaped not only by their dreams and choices, but by the quality of our example, what we have modelled, valued, questioned, and committed ourselves to.

Their vision of the future will grow from the seeds we have helped to plant.

Looking out at this remarkable group of young people, I can say with confidence: you have planted wisely. The future is in very good hands.

For our graduates, this evening marks the end of many years of formal schooling.

You've worked hard, I'm sure, and I hope the doorways to your dreams are beginning to open before you.

But always remember that your worth is not defined by your exam results, and your life's calling cannot be reduced to numbers or grades. Your vocation in life is sacred. It will unfold in ways no report card can predict.

The poet John O'Donohue once wrote, "To be born is to be chosen."

There is something uniquely yours to offer the world. Listen for that calling. And when you find it, follow it with all your heart.

I imagine that, after these formalities, you will be ready to pack away your schoolbooks and hang up your uniforms for good, and rightly so!

This is a moment of transition, of letting go and moving forward.

But as you leave behind those outward signs of school life, I urge you not to leave behind the deeper lessons you've learned here—the lessons that shape character, purpose, and meaning.

Your happiness and the future of our world will depend on how well you remember them.

So tonight, in the brief time we have together, I'd like to revisit a few of the life lessons that you have learned during your time at school.



You have learned much about **our relationship with the Divine and what this asks of us.**

You have learned that all creation has its source in God.

There exists a spark of divinity in every one of us, and we are not separate from The Divine or from each other.

As the leaf emerges from the tree and is an expression of the life of the tree, so do we emerge from God and are expressions of God's love and compassion in the world.

We are called to make God visible to the world and to be the embodiment of Divine love, kindness, and compassion.

There is a story of a grandmother shopping for gifts for her grandchildren. While in a toy store, she noticed a small homeless girl peering through the window. Moved with compassion, she invited the child inside and asked her to choose a gift. As they left the store, the girl held the grandmother's hand, looked into her gentle eyes, and asked, "Are you God?"

The grandmother, touched and a little surprised, replied, "No, my dear, I'm not God." The child asked again, "Then who are you?" The grandmother paused and said, "I am a child of God." The little girl beamed and said, "Yes, I could tell there was a connection."

Let that be true of us also.

When people encounter us, may they sense that same Divine connection in and through us. A presence that heals, welcomes, and uplifts.

We were created from love, by love, to love.

The highest expressions of any faith are kindness, compassion, and a commitment to justice.

When our hearts ache for the suffering of others, that is God's own heart beating within us. When we long to see others joyful, it is through our eyes that God sees. And when we labour to ease someone's burden, our hands become instruments of God's will.

Buddhist teacher Alan Clements once offered this advice:

Live your life and struggle to be who you want to be. There is no higher teaching outside of this. It is up to each of us to be as creative and gutsy as we can be, willing to make life as profound as we can.

The mystic Hafiz once wrote, "I am a hole in the flute that God's breath moves through. Listen to the music God makes through me."

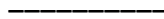
May we become such instruments, through whom God's music of love, compassion and peace is played.

The world is waiting for your music, the song that only you can sing.

Inspired by your school motto:

Sing it faithfully.

Sing it bravely



Your education has helped you consider **what it means to be successful, happy, and to live a good life.**

Much of the world urges us to crave more: more wealth, more status, more security, treating these things as ultimate goals in life.

It thrives on our restlessness, on our uncertainty about what "enough" truly means.

Your education has challenged you to see through these shallow definitions of what makes life good, meaningful, and worthwhile. To reject the idea that success is measured only by accumulation and social status.

Abiding happiness arises from being more rather than having more, from the quality of our hearts rather than the size of our bank accounts.

Given the way our currency inflates, many, if not most, of you will become millionaires. But don't confuse that material wealth with the richness of the soul. As we often hear, some of the wealthiest people in the world are also the most alone.

You won't be a millionaire in hours. Life will grant you only a few thousand truly meaningful hours to love, to heal, to serve.

Use them well.

You are not cogs, gears or wheels in some impersonal machine called an economy. You are visionaries, creators, and builders of a better future.

You are not here to merely fit into the world, but to reimagine and remake it.

You have been sent to this school not simply to attain a qualification. You have received an education.

As well as knowledge and skills, your education has gifted you with vision, values, and a sense of calling.

In a world that can be toxic to self-directed thinking, follow your inner guide and advance confidently toward your dreams. Resist being pushed around by peer pressure, by prejudices and delusions and from potential nonsense that can masquerade as truth.

Aspire to a life independent of the approval or good opinion of others. Unshackle yourself from unexamined opinions and inherited prejudices and embrace the capacity to question and make meaning, to contribute and live reflectively and compassionately.

The ancient Greek root of the word "hero" means "the one who can choose." A true hero is the author of their own destiny, interpreting life through their own lived experience. The hero's path is one of questioning the culture they inherit: Who am I? What truly matters? What brings peace? What does justice look like?

Heroes don't settle for easy answers. They see beyond the surface and engage the world on their own terms. They claim the freedom to love, to pursue truth, to do what is good, and to create what is beautiful. And just as importantly, they have the courage to reject what is false, ugly, or mean-spirited.

Now more than ever, we need you to be those heroes.

Your education has taught you much **about freedom, responsibility and service.**

I once heard someone say that next to the Statue of Liberty in New York, there should stand a Statue of Responsibility. That image has stayed with me.

Freedom and responsibility must always walk hand in hand. It is through service to others that freedom finds its highest purpose.

With the freedom that you enjoy through the good fortune of your birth and the sacrifices of many comes the responsibility to serve and contribute.

Choose wisely and engage with the world on your own terms.

Claim your freedom to love, to choose truth, to do good, to create the beautiful. But also, reject the ugly, the false and the mean-spirited.

As Pope Francis reminded us, we are free for the good; free to love, to serve, to uplift, to build something that lasts beyond us.

Liberty is not simply the option to do whatever we want; rather, true freedom gives us the opportunity to do what we must to contribute to the lives of others and help shape a more just and compassionate world.

I have no doubt that some of you here tonight will be recognised for your service on a national level, on the big stage. This is wonderful. But for most of us, our service will be most needed and valued in our families, friendships, and local communities. A smaller stage, but every bit as important.

In Mother Teresa's words: We don't have to all do great things, only small things with great love.

It will be the quality of your heart, not the size of your résumé, that will be your enduring legacy.

Strive at all costs to make a better world, so that someday, if we are blessed with the chance to look back on our time here, we can know that we spent it well, that we made a difference, that our fleeting presence had a lasting impact on the lives of other human beings.

We live our lives in deeds, not years, thoughts, not breaths. We cannot know for certain how long we have here. We cannot foresee the trials or misfortunes that will test us along the way. We cannot know God's plan for us. What we can do is live our lives as best we can, with purpose, love, and joy.

In the end, we won't be remembered for what we accumulated, but for what we gave. Not for how high we climbed, but for how deeply we loved. Not for how many things we did, but for whether our actions made the world better for someone else.

Over two thousand years ago, Aristotle reminded people that we are what we repeatedly do! Remember that goodness is a habit, a practised act, something that is formed over a lifetime, the sum of so many small choices in which the well-being of others is routinely put ahead of my own self-interest.

A happy and meaningful life is made up of a series of simple acts of decency and kindness, which, over the course of a lifetime, add up to something truly magnificent.



And so, as you step beyond the gates of school and into the next chapter of your lives, go with a spirit of gratitude.

Enjoy your precious life, but avoid a sense of entitlement. Be grateful and remember that the hardest arithmetic that we will ever be called to master is that which enables us to count our blessings.

It is good to see the cup half full rather than half empty. It is even better to be grateful for the cup!

Someone wise once said, "We have two lives. The second begins when we realise that we only have one."

Your life is a sacred gift. Your time here is brief. Don't squander it.

Avoid the quiet tragedy of living a half-life, never fully showing up to the one precious chance you've been given.

In the words of the great Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore, we run the risk of spending our days stringing and unstringing our instrument, while the song we came to sing remains unsung.

So don't wait. Don't let your song go unsung.

There is a wonderful story from the Jewish Scriptures:

When Akiba was on his deathbed, he bemoaned to his rabbi that he felt he was a failure. His rabbi moved closer and asked why, and Akiba confessed that he had not lived as Moses had. The poor man began to cry, admitting that he feared God's judgment. At this, his rabbi leaned into his ear and whispered gently, "God will not judge Akiba for not being Moses. God will judge Akiba for not being Akiba."

You are born with only one obligation: to be completely who you are.

Your tenderness, your ideas, your dreams; that is your song. And the world is waiting to hear its melody.

The beauty of our humanity is that perfection isn't required. All that is asked of us is authenticity. To live truthfully. To do our best. That is enough. That is everything.

And when, one day, you look back over your life, may the questions that rise in your heart be simple:

Did I live with passion and purpose?

Did I love deeply and well?

Did I bring joy to others?

Did I find joy for myself?

And so, friends, let us all take inspiration from the words of George Bernard Shaw:

This is the true joy in life.... being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one.

I believe my life belongs to the whole community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the more I contribute, the more I live.

Life is no "brief candle" to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I have hold of for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

Burn brightly!

May every choice you make, every moment you embrace, be a brushstroke on the canvas of a life well-lived. Dare to create with vibrant hues; dare to etch your legacy in the hearts of those around you.

May every tear you shed during your life's journey water seeds of love, compassion and tolerance.

May you be generous with your service, extravagant with your kindness, and relentless in your hope.

Your happiness and the future of our world depend on it.

Go with confidence in the direction of your dreams. Live the life you have imagined.

Thank you. Congratulations. Many blessings to you all.

Love the earth and sun and the animals, despise riches, give alms to everyone that asks, stand up for the stupid and crazy, devote your income and labour to others, hate tyrants, argue not concerning God, have patience and indulgence toward the people, take off your hat to nothing known or unknown or to any person or number of people, go freely with powerful uneducated persons and with the young and with the mothers of families, read these leaves in the open air every season of every year of your life, re-examine all you have been told at school or church or in any book, dismiss whatever insults your own soul, and your very flesh shall be a great poem.

Walt Whitman in Leaves of Grass

RELIGION AND DIVINE EXPERIENCE

Your religion is not the Church you belong to, but the cosmos you live inside of.

G.K. Chesterton

For most people, their image of God can be too small, a mere glimpse of the majesty of the Universal Essence of all-embracing love and compassion.

The Divine transcends denominations and traditions, creeds and ethnicities. God is God for everyone. No religion or faith can own, mediate or limit the flow of Divine love and compassion.

God is the one whose centre is everywhere and circumference nowhere. God is the Good that diffuses itself.

St Bonaventure

God is the living depth within all things, the goodness beneath existence itself, the love from which we come and toward which we move.

Every act of compassion, every moment of beauty, every experience of awe becomes a doorway to the Divine. The spiritual life is less about 'finding God' far away and more about awakening and experiencing the Divine Consciousness, already here, our true identity.

I belong to the soul of the Beloved. Does the Beloved have a religion?

Rumi

In their teachings on love, unity, kindness, and compassion, as well as their contemplative teachings that lead to the experience of the Divine, our great traditions of faith and spirituality are inspired by the Divine. Different roads converging upon the same point.

In every religion, there is love, yet love has no religion.

Rumi

The scriptures of these traditions can all reflect the same Divine voice speaking in different languages. I say 'can' because, sadly, in many cases, the opposite is true. The Divine Essence, or love and compassion, is often betrayed in scriptures and teachings that alienate, condemn or marginalise.

I believe in the fundamental truth of all great religions of the world. I believe they are all God-given and necessary for the people to whom these religions were revealed. And I believe

that, if only we could all read the scriptures of the different faiths from the standpoint of their followers, we should find that they were, at the bottom, all one and helpful to one another.

Gandhi

The late Benedictine monk, Bede Griffiths, who lived in India for most of his life, often used his fingers to represent the world's major religious faiths. The tops of the fingers represent the theology, beliefs and customs of these faiths. They are all separate from one another. Moving down each finger, they merge at the palm. When one journeys deeply into different religious traditions, they converge at a common Source, the encounter with the Divine.

The highest expressions of any faith are kindness, service, love, compassion and a commitment to universal justice.

To work for the common good is the greatest creed.

We can reject everything else, but we cannot escape the necessity of love and compassion. This, then, is my true religion, my simple faith. There is no need for a temple, a church, a mosque, or a synagogue; no need for complicated philosophy, doctrine, or dogma. Our own heart, our own mind, is the temple. The doctrine is compassion. Love for others and respect for their rights and dignity, no matter who they are: ultimately, these are all we need.

The Dalai Lama

The Dalai Lama was once approached by a monk who had spent 18 years in a Chinese gulag. The monk confessed that there were times when he had felt in danger. His Holiness asked the monk what the greatest danger that he had experienced was. The monk replied that the greatest danger he had experienced in the gulag was the danger of losing compassion for the Chinese guards who oppressed him.

There is the story of a religious person who dreams that he dies and meets the Lord at the gates of paradise. He was asked by the Lord if he knew the reason for this blessing of reaching paradise. The man enumerated all his religious duties - fasting and praying, attending services- but none of these acts of piety had saved him. Finally, the Lord asked him, 'Do you remember the cold day when it was snowing, and you were walking in your coat when you saw a poor boy shivering with cold, and you offered your coat to him? For the sake of this boy, I have welcomed you.

The task of any religion is to inspire, direct and nurture the seeds of the search for unity with the Divine that already lie within each human heart.

When one enters a restaurant, one does not eat the menu. The menu is simply a guide to the experience one can have if one chooses to eat. Religions perform the same function. At their best, they are guides to how we can experience the Divine.

The reason why organised religion has failed to transform humanity is that it has not sufficiently emphasised that its sole justification is to open the way to spiritual existence.

S.K. Radhakrishnan

Knowledge about religion and theology is never a substitute for knowing the Divine. Simply believing is a poor substitute for the living experience of the Divine manifesting through you every moment of your life. The academic study of aeronautics is no substitute for the experience of flying.

There is a wonderful story of a holy man who put up a sign, 'For two cents, I will give you an experience of God. When people came to see him, he told them to put their money in a little bowl, then gave them a few grains of sugar and told them to eat them. He did not ask them to describe its taste or talk about its sweetness. They simply had to eat and experience the sugar. The man then observed, 'What is sweetness? Just as it can only be known through experience, so it is with God!' Sweetness is an experience, just as God is an experience.

The richness of our religious traditions as guides to the experience of the Divine is obscured by moralising, intellectualising and defending themselves. Their insights into the spiritual journey have been clouded by the accumulation of rigid practices, ideologies and dogma.

We waste so much time arguing which religion is right and holds the truth. We should listen to Swami Agnivesh when he reminded us that:

The enemies of religions cannot be other religions. The enemies of religion are poverty, injustice, illiteracy, exploitation, discrimination, and all that subvert the spiritual goal of fullness of life for all people.

Any God worthy of the name must transcend creeds and denominations, time and place, nations, and ethnicities, and all the vagaries of gender, extending to the limits of all we can see, suffer, and enjoy.

Richard Rohr

If we remain at the level of dogmas and definitions, we are divided and argue; but in the spiritual life of inward prayer and

contemplation, we are united, both with each other and with the Supreme.

S Radhakrishnan

I was born a Christian and find inspiration and guidance from the experience of Jesus in the Gospels. Because of my birth, my spiritual journey may give preference to Christianity, but Universal Consciousness does not. How could this be? Only one half of one per cent of people born since the beginning of time have come to hear of Jesus of Nazareth.

People have grown weary of religion that they perceive as being rigid, competitive, moralising, and dogmatic: beliefs and practices that are divisive and do not speak to the search for meaning and wholeness.

Jesuit priest Bernard Lonergan once said that Jesus sent us to be fishers of people, yet we have been fishing for ideas and formulations to prove we are correct.

Lives are not transformed by ideas, beliefs, and formulations; rather, transformation happens through a change in consciousness. I spent many years studying theology and religion. These courses may have helped me with language about God, but they rarely led me to experience and know Divine Consciousness in my life.

Mysticism is the life of religion; without it, religion loses the reason of its existence – all its warm vitality is gone, all its inexpressible charms vanish, and there remains nothing but the crumbling bones and the cold ashes of death.

D T Suzuki

I no longer feel the need to profess belief in 'God'. I have experienced the Divine essence so profoundly and immediately in my life that mere expressions of belief are now irrelevant. The search for deep experience of the Divine has become my life's central preoccupation.

The world doesn't need more adherents of religious systems. Rather, it needs more people who embody the teachings of love, compassion and justice which abound in all faith traditions. As Tolstoy once said: 'Don't tell me about your religion, let me see your religion in your actions.'

The God I experience now bears little resemblance to the God that I was taught about in my youth. Rather than an external, paternalistic and supernatural deity, I now experience and respond to the Divine as a quiet presence or consciousness within myself.

A gentle, healing and warm call to experience and manifest love, kindness and compassion. Deep consolation in times of difficulty, the rapture of peak experiences of meditation, joy and beauty, the 'flow' and grace when my hand is on the steering wheel of my life, and it is surely and gently guided, and an 'aha' moment when engaged with my spiritual reading and reflection.

Mark Nepo recounts this story:

'This brings to mind the story of a young Divinity student who was stricken with polio, and from somewhere deep within him came an unlikely voice calling him to, of all things, dance. So, with great difficulty, he quit divinity school and began to dance, and slowly and miraculously, he not only regained the use of his legs but went on to become one of the fathers of modern dance. This is the story of Ted Shawn, and it is compelling for us to realise that studying God did not heal him. Embodying God did. The fact of Ted Shawn's miracle shows us that Dance, in all its forms, is Theology lived.'

To endeavour to know God without being God-like is like trying to swim without entering water.

Orest Bedrij

We praise God most completely by embodying and manifesting the Divine presence in our lives and relationships.

SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF THE YOUNG

Faith is the bird that feels the light and sings while the dawn is still dark.

Ravindranath Tagore

Every generation must find new language for ancient truth; must write new chapters of the same great love story.

Spiritual formation is the process of helping others to experience and enact the Divine in their lives in the most expansive way possible. It is about awakening them to what already burns within: the living presence of the Divine, the sweetness of love, the freedom of wonder, and the courage to live it fully.

The great thinker Joseph Campbell proposed that, more than knowledge of the meaning of life, what most people crave is an experience of living.

In a similar way, more than knowledge about God, what people really crave is an experience of Divine Consciousness in their lives.

Every generation must find new language for ancient truth; must write new chapters of the same great love story.

The notion of 'God' we have presented to the young has been too small. We have been focused on answering questions that aren't being asked.

Passing on faith is not a call to transmit theologies, beliefs and practices or hand on doctrines and traditions. It is not about getting people to believe the right things to get to some special place.

Lives are not transformed by rearranging ideas, but rather by the awakening of consciousness.

Spiritual formation is helping others to experience and enact the Divine in their lives in the most expansive way possible.

It is not about persuasion; it is about encounter.

Spiritual formation is about awakening people to what already burns within: the living presence of the Divine, the sweetness of love, the freedom of wonder, and the courage to live it fully.

It is not about getting people to believe the right things to reach some special place.

The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

Marcel Proust

It is about inspiring people to see the world with Divine eyes.

To look at the world through human eyes but see the world through hearts of love, compassion, inclusion and justice. Through God's eyes, all that we can see is God. How this can recreate our world!

Jesus was clear about this.

Jesus preached not a religion, nor an institution, nor even himself. He was not primarily a teacher of what to believe or how to behave. He proclaimed the Reign of God, a way of transformation from a life in the world of conventional wisdom to a life centred in God.

He was not attempting to create a new religion; he wanted people to experience the Divine and be transformed.

He proclaimed the Reign of God, the in-breaking of Divine life into ordinary human experience. He invited people to live not by rules and convention, but by awakened consciousness, not by fear, but by love

We should teach our children nothing that they shall ever need to unlearn; we should strive to transmit to them the best possessions, the truest thought, the noblest sentiments of the age in which we live.

Felix Adler

Mark Nepo reflects:

'Robert had filled the bathtub and put the fish in the tub, so he could clean their tank. After he'd scrubbed the film from the small walls of their make-believe deep, he went to retrieve them. He was astonished to find that, though they had the entire tub to swim in, they were huddled in a small area the size of their tank. There was nothing to contain them, nothing to hold them back. Why wouldn't they dart about freely? What had life in the tank done to their natural ability to swim?

Life in the tank made me think of how we are raised at home and in school. It made me think of being told that certain jobs are not acceptable and that certain jobs are out of reach, of being schooled to live a certain way, of being trained to think

that only practical things are possible, of being warned over and over that life outside the tank of our values is risky and dangerous.

I began to see just how much we can be taught as children to fear life outside the tank.'

In a hotel I once stayed in, there were two sets of goldfish. In a tank inside the lobby, the goldfish were small and confined, while in a pond outside the front door, the fish were large and swam freely. I was told that they were all the same variety of fish and that goldfish can grow to be small or large, depending on the space they are given. There is a lesson here for the formation of the young.

There are lessons here for the spiritual formation of young people.

The 'pond' of spirituality and religious experience in which we educate them should be large enough to allow them to grow, explore, and maximise their spiritual potential.

The opposite is to confine and limit, small fish in a small tank.

I was deeply saddened when I heard that a Catholic school was forbidden by the Bishop of the Diocese to offer experiences of meditation and yoga to students. What fear and ignorance. A denial of the traditions of mysticism within all faiths, including Catholicism. Yoga means union with God, and meditation is a portal to the experience of Divine Consciousness. What is really being feared here?

We risk teaching our young everything in the world except the most essential things: the essence of a fully lived, creative humanity. We assume that young people learn these things by osmosis. But when we look around at our fragmented world, it doesn't appear to be working that well by osmosis alone.

Instead of teaching them to give answers, we should challenge them to ask questions. Deep life questions that encourage a lifelong quest for answers, evolving with the journey of their lives.

As someone once said, questions you can wrap your life around.

Who am I?

What is my life's purpose?

What constitutes a good, worthwhile and full life?

How do I come to know peace and happiness?

Is there meaning in suffering?

How do I approach death?

When was the last time that you saw a religion curriculum built around these and similar questions?

GRATITUDE AND EQUANIMITY

As I get older, and a little further on from a cancer scare that I had a few years ago, I try hard to live in conscious gratitude for all that happens in my life.

Gratitude opens our eyes to the joy and blessings already present in our lives. It shifts our focus from what's missing to what's meaningful. Gratitude allows us to find happiness in the simple and the everyday, the elegance of sufficiency, the beauty of enough.

Gratitude can turn even the simplest meal into a joyful feast, a mere dwelling into a cherished home, and a stranger into a cherished friend. It is not just a virtue but the foundation upon which all virtues are built.

As we cultivate gratitude, we become more present and connected to the abundance around us. Gratitude is transformative, promoting our well-being and attracting even more reasons to be grateful.

Brené Brown, in 12 years of research drawing on 11,000 data points, reports that she did not find a single person who described themselves as joyful and did not actively practice gratitude.

Practising gratitude invites joy into our lives. As Brene Brown says: 'It's not joy that makes us grateful, it's gratitude that makes us joyful.'

The root of all joy is gratefulness. It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful.

David Steindl-Rast

Gratitude separates privilege from entitlement. It celebrates what we have in our lives rather than lamenting what we don't have.

It is good to see the cup half full rather than half empty. It is even better to be grateful for the cup!

My greatest teacher of gratitude was a very poor woman in India who suffered terribly from the disease of leprosy.

I was with a group of 16 other people from Australian schools, and we were about to visit a community of people who suffer from leprosy in India.

At the entrance to the colony, we encountered a woman who had a very advanced case of leprosy and found it very difficult to walk. She greeted us with a smile and was very excited.

We found out that this woman had travelled for 4 hours to reach the colony so she could receive a pair of sandals, fashioned especially for people with leprosy and made from discarded truck and car tyres.

Since people with leprosy lose the feeling in their limbs, stronger protection is necessary, particularly for the feet. People suffer from infections caused by nails and other foot injuries. This is often the cause of severe illness and death.

We visited the small workshop in the colony where these rough sandals were made and found the same woman in an overwhelmingly happy and excited state of mind.

I spoke with the cobbler, and he showed me the sandals that the lady was about to receive.

I must admit that I was taken aback when I first saw the sandals, as the left foot seemed to be of normal size, whereas the right foot was only of sufficient size to cover the stump that this lady had where her foot used to be.

I was privileged to be in the same room and see the delight and thankfulness that she expressed when she was presented with this most basic of footwear. It was as if she had won the lottery!

Not far from my house in Melbourne, there is a very expensive shoe shop where people can pay \$ 1,000 or more for a pair of imported shoes.

I wonder how long I would have to observe the happenings in that shop to encounter anyone expressing anything near the delight that this woman showed at the receipt of her simple sandals.

In fact, I've seen some angry and disappointed looks on people's faces simply because the half size isn't available, the shoe doesn't quite fit, or they have to wait for service.

This experience really brought home to me the meaning of the ancient Persian saying: 'I wept because I had no shoes, until I saw a person with no feet!'

The hardest arithmetic to master is that which enables us to count our blessings.

Eric Hoffer

The education we offer the young should consistently remind them that, although we cannot control all the good and bad, positive and negative, that life will throw at us, we do have the freedom to control how we respond to these circumstances.

As Viktor Frankl, who survived the German concentration camps, said:

Everything can be taken from us but the last of human freedoms: the freedom to choose our spirit in any circumstance.

I love the story of Roberto de Vincenzo, an Argentine golfer who became quite famous in the 1960s. He was the first golfer from South America to make it on the big stage.

There is a famous story about one day Roberto won a golf tournament and received his pay cheque. In those days, professional golfers drove from tournament to tournament. He was in the car park about to put his golf clubs in the boot of his car, when he was approached by a woman who had a baby in her arms. She said, "Mr de Vincenzo, my baby is very sick and will die if he does not receive the right medicine. Can you please help me?" Without hesitation, Roberto de Vincenzo signed over his winning cheque to this woman, saying to her, "There you go, lady. I hope your child enjoys many happy days."

A week later, when he was arriving at another PGA tournament, an official came up to him and said, "Roberto, I hear that you handed over your winner's cheque last week to a lady who had a sick baby." He said, "Yes, that's right" The official said, "Look, I'm sorry, my friend, but she fleeced you. The lady was a fraud, and the baby was not sick." Roberto responded, "You mean there was no sick baby who was going to die?" The official said, "Yes". Roberto responded, "Well, that's the best news I've heard all year!"

This is a person who was truly free.

The great Way is not difficult for those who have no preferences...the struggle with what one likes and dislikes is a disease of the mind.

Zen Master Sosan

Jiddu Krishnamurti was a mystic and spiritual teacher who died in 1986.

In a gathering with devotees towards the end of his life, he leaned forward and said, 'Do you want to know what my secret is?'

The audience was electrified and strained to hear a great revelation. In a quiet, shy voice, Krishnamurti said: 'You see, I don't mind what happens.'

His words were not advocating passive acceptance of wrongdoing or injustice.

He is asking us not to let our preconceived notions of what constitutes a good outcome in any given circumstance disturb our inner peace.

Krishnamurti's teaching strikes at the very foundation of the psychological self—the bundle of memories, beliefs, and identities we cling to.

He challenged listeners to observe the self without judgment and to see how the mind's constant commentary creates conflict.

"I don't mind what happens" is a doorway to self-transcendence, to a consciousness not rooted in ego but in silence and attention. This is not an idea to believe in; it's a truth to be discovered.

When we genuinely do not mind what happens, we are not deadened or detached; we are vibrantly alive. We are no longer asking life to confirm our stories or give us comfort. We are awake to the beauty and mystery of each moment.

When we live a life of worry and concern for what may transpire, we cannot live fully, joyfully and freely in the present moment.

Krishnamurti offers a way to experience inner freedom and release from attachment to outcomes. When we say, "I don't mind what happens," we are not giving up on life—we are entering into it fully. We are no longer prisoners of the past or anxious about the future. We are free.

It is not what happens to you, but how you react to it that matters.

Epictetus

In spiritual practice, we call this 'surrender', not giving up, but rather, giving over to God.

In the ancient language of Sanskrit, the word for worry is almost identical to the word for funeral pyre. It shouldn't surprise.

One burns the dead, while the other burns the living!

Let's remember some simple advice from Mother Teresa:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centred. Forgive them anyway.

If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway.

If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.

If you are honest and sincere, people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.

What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.

If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.

The good you do today will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.

Give your best, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.

In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

SOME THOUGHTS ON EVANGELISATION AND MISSION

Up until the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s, much of the Catholic Church's theology of mission reflected a limited understanding of God's love and compassion.

It was often rooted in the belief that the world outside the Church was inherently evil and unredeemed, suggesting that introducing the Gospel meant dismantling cultures and religious beliefs that had existed for centuries.

This mission was frequently characterised by conquest, domination, and a troubling disregard for 'the other.' Christianity was viewed as the superior and normative faith, the only one deemed worthy of existence and expansion.

In light of these beliefs, the process of evangelisation, what it meant to carry out the mission, was not merely seen as a commendable act; it became an urgent and pressing necessity. The alternative, they believed, was to leave souls in their sins, facing the dire consequence of eternal separation from God.



The Second Vatican Council, however, signalled a new direction for the Church and its mission.

It spoke of the Kingdom, or Reign, of God, a presence that unfolds in mystery around us. This mystery serves as a reminder of God's rich and varied presence in our lives today.

The Council acknowledged that God is, and has always been, present and active in every culture, even before the advent of Jesus and the Christian era. This understanding invites us to recognise the Divine hand at work in the tapestry of human history.

It also recognised that God's Reign extends beyond the Church; they are not synonymous. As St Oscar Romero said:

Everyone who struggles for justice, everyone who makes just claims in unjust surroundings, is working for God's reign, even though not a Christian. The church does not comprise all of God's reign; God's reign goes beyond the church's

boundaries. The church values everything that aligns with its struggle to establish God's reign. A church that tries only to keep itself pure and uncontaminated would not be a church of God's service to people.

While the Church earnestly strives to embody and reflect the Reign of God, a sense of incompleteness in that relationship reminds us that we are all still on a journey. The Church exists to carry out in the world what Jesus did during his time on earth. Jesus was not trying to establish a new religion; he was inviting people to encounter the Divine in their everyday lives.

At its best, the Church serves as a sign and instrument of the Reign of God, sharing the story of how God engages lovingly with the world and inviting us all to participate in that Divine dance.

The Council embraced the idea that our mission begins not with a push for conversion to Christianity, but with a heartfelt invitation to share the Gospel's vision of love, compassion, and justice with everyone.

Jesus did not instruct us to go out and make Catholics, Lutherans, or Anglicans. Instead, he called us to make disciples, individuals who embody the spirit of the Gospel, encouraging others to adopt his way of living and to see the world through the compassionate eyes of God.

Conversion isn't about abandoning one's current beliefs in favour of Christianity. It's about turning toward the priorities of the Gospel and taking on the responsibility of realising the Divine vision for our world.



To have roots is not to be root-bound.

What truly matters is the essence of the Christian message, not the specific forms it has taken over time. Its sacredness lies in its core, which speaks to the heart of humanity.

The beliefs and practices we hold are like vehicles for this message; they should be thoughtfully examined, adapted, and updated when necessary to ensure that the core message continues to resonate and thrive.

The relationship between our faith tradition and the diverse cultures surrounding us should be one of openness and conversation, inviting growth and understanding.

Jeremiah, Augustine, and Martin Luther had differing beliefs, yet they all shared a profound faith and are integral to our rich tapestry of tradition.

This is why the Judeo-Christian tradition, now around 4,000 years old, has maintained its essence while also evolving to meet the needs of the cultures it encounters.

Lloyd Geering

As a river flows, it picks up sediment and debris from its banks, depositing them along the way. What remains constant is the river itself, not the ever-changing contents it carries. In the same way, our tradition of faith adapts and grows within the diverse contexts of time and culture, always seeking to connect with the human experience.

The Gospel illuminates the profound human, existential, and spiritual questions that resonate across all cultures; it is offered freely, inviting us to explore without pressure. This message enriches the understanding and experience of God's presence already present and active, deepening connection with the Divine.

To truly grasp the essence of the Gospel, we must strip away the layers of cultural trappings that, while meaningful to some, do not embody the core message of love, inclusion, and compassion it represents.

Culture plays a vital role in making the Gospel's vision relatable and understandable.

When we approach evangelisation, we must remember that its effectiveness diminishes if it overlooks the realities of the people it seeks to reach; it should speak in their language, resonate with their symbols, and address the questions that weigh on their hearts, making a tangible difference in their lives.

The Gospel is 'enfleshed' or 'embodied' within the unique tapestry of a people and their culture; through genuine dialogue, the Gospel takes on the life and spirit of those it encounters, becoming a living expression of faith.

Evangelisation is a conversation in which the evangelizer, in their quest to understand the hearts and minds of those they engage with, their hopes, fears, and stories, also finds themselves transformed, gaining a deeper understanding of what the Gospel calls us all to aspire to.

Mission is not merely about growing the church; it is about allowing the Gospel to be reborn in each new context and culture, creating a vibrant and dynamic faith that reflects the richness of our diverse human experience.



Many years ago, I attended a lecture that profoundly shaped my understanding of the Church, mission, and ministry. The speaker was a Canadian priest who had dedicated over thirty years of his life to working in Africa.

Shortly after his ordination, he set sail for Africa, filled with hope and a sense of purpose. Upon arrival, he was warmly welcomed, given a brief moment to orient himself, and then sent off to a remote village to begin his ministry. At that time, the prevailing model of mission felt straightforward: success was measured primarily by the number of converts and baptisms. The more individuals who joined the Church, the more successful the missionary was seen to be.

The young priest immersed himself in the life of the village for several years. He came to love the people deeply, and they, in turn, embraced him as one of their own. They supported him through bouts of illness, moments of loneliness, and the myriad challenges of adapting to a new culture. He shared with them the stories and teachings of Jesus, striving to serve them with all his heart. Yet after five years, when he and his bishop reviewed his ministry, the results felt disheartening, with only a handful of formal conversions to Christianity.

Feeling uncertain about his place, the priest spoke with his bishop, who agreed to facilitate a transfer. When he gathered the villagers to share the news of his departure, their reaction touched him deeply. They were saddened, yes, but their words would forever alter his understanding of mission.

"Father," they said with sincerity, "you have lived among us long enough to understand our culture. You know that for thousands of years, wisdom and authority in spiritual matters have been entrusted to the Elders. Father, you are still a young man."

They continued gently, "You also know that in our culture, a man is not fully considered a man until he has had his first son. Father, you do not even have a wife."

The priest later reflected on how those heartfelt words from people he loved shook the very foundations of his assumptions. For the first time, he began to see that much of what he had brought to Africa was not solely the Gospel of Jesus but also the cultural forms, assumptions, and expectations steeped in his own Canadian and European heritage.

He realised that for the message of Jesus to truly resonate within that culture, it could not simply be transplanted in its Western form. The Gospel needed to express itself through the language, symbols, wisdom, relationships, and cultural realities of the people themselves. If the Church were to be genuine, it might look very different from what he had envisioned upon his arrival.

Most importantly, he began to reconsider the criteria by which his mission was assessed. Perhaps success was not merely about counting baptisms. Perhaps it was about presence, relationship, mutual transformation, and the patient work of allowing the Spirit to move within a culture rather than imposing something foreign upon it.

Following this transformative shift in perspective, the priest chose to remain in the village for many more years. This story has stayed with me because it raises a question that resonates just as deeply today: Are we called to make people like us, or to help them uncover the Divine already alive within their own culture, experience, and humanity?

The answer to that question changes everything.

Evangelisation is not merely a response to perceived threats facing the Church, nor is it a frantic attempt to reclaim a bygone era. It isn't solely about reaching out to those who feel lost in sin, as if they were beyond the grasp of the organised Church. Instead, it is a journey of connection and understanding, inviting others to experience insights into divine love and compassion that Christianity offers.

What is the role of the evangeliser?

The evangeliser offers the seed of the Gospel vision to those around them. Like a gardener, they prepare the soil, seek guidance, and understand the best times and

methods for sowing seeds. As growth emerges, they nurture it carefully, allowing young plants to develop their own strength.

In this interaction, both the Gospel and the cultures it touches are transformed, as is the evangeliser. They all experience a range of emotions as they engage with the world. The more they invest in this process, the more they find themselves enriched, drawing strength and wisdom from the connection of faith, culture, and the Gospel.

A church shrivels up and dies if it no longer sheds light on people's lives.

Fr Jon Sobrino

The lessons from that priest's experience resonate deeply for educators today, especially for those of us engaged with young people whose cultures, languages, and worldviews might feel worlds apart from our own.

As educators and parents, we often perceive that many young people are turning away from "the Faith." However, I believe this isn't necessarily a rejection of the transformative power of the Gospel or even of Christ himself. More frequently, it seems to be a distancing from the forms, assumptions, and cultural frameworks through which faith is sometimes conveyed. We often confuse the vessel with the treasure it holds.

One of our enduring responsibilities in education is to ensure that we don't pass on ideas that future generations will need to spend their lives unlearning. Instead, we should aim to present young people with the finest wisdom, the deepest insights, and the most life-affirming understandings available to us. Each generation must rediscover how timeless truths can be articulated in ways that resonate meaningfully with their own contexts.

While many young people may feel disconnected from institutional religion, most are very much engaged in a search for meaning, purpose, belonging, and hope. They aspire to be part of something greater than themselves and are drawn to authenticity, justice, compassion, and a vision for life that ignites their imagination.

Throughout my years in education, I have encountered countless young individuals who have distanced themselves from a Church they felt was remote or unrelatable. Yet, I have met very few whose hearts weren't touched by the person of Jesus, a prophet who spoke to the realities of ordinary lives, championed the

marginalised, challenged injustice, and invited people into a life rich with meaning, courage, and possibility.

For this reason, youth ministry should never become an anxious endeavour aimed at keeping young people within the Church or trying to win them back. Such an approach often stems from fear rather than faith. Our mission is much more profound and simpler. We are called to live lives shaped by the Gospel, to accompany young people with respect and authenticity, and to trust in the enduring power of the Good News itself. The message of Jesus doesn't require our protection or defence; it simply needs to be lived.

When young people encounter adults whose lives shine with compassion, integrity, hope, and genuine care, they catch a glimpse of the Gospel made flesh. The challenge isn't to make Jesus relevant to young people; He is already relevant. The true challenge lies in ensuring that our words, structures, and practices do not obscure the beauty, freedom, and transformative power of the Gospel vision.

