

THE BOWERBIRD COLLECTION

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

Rumi

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

However, 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... curating one's life with intentionality, beauty, and careful selection of possessions.

Isn't that one of the most noble ambitions that we could aspire to?

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

The Bowerbird Collection is comprised of four books which speak to Our Common Heart:

- Awakening To Our Common Heart
- Living Our Common Heart
- Educating For Our Common Heart

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

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 journeying with me as we explore Our Common Heart.

Peace and blessings

Wayne

Note:

In this collection, I will use the terms 'God', 'the Divine', 'Divine Consciousness' or 'Sacred Spark' to refer to the ineffable Source of all-embracing love and compassion that transcends all labels, denominations, creeds and ethnicities. This language is helpful for me, but readers may substitute these for whatever language speaks to them. Ultimately, though, all names and labels are inadequate.

If you read no further, read this and take it to heart:

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)

BOOK ONE

Awakening to Our Common Heart

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

Part 1

BEING: DISCOVERING OUR TRUE IDENTITY

There comes a moment in most lives when we suspect there is something more than what we are experiencing. Not more to possess or achieve, but more to being alive. We sense that beneath the roles we play, the identities we assume, and the emotions we feel lies a more authentic experience of being and living.

Like the wonderful actors we admire, we can become fully immersed in playing the role of the person we believe we are and are expected to be. In doing so, we can forget our true identity beyond this role.

At different times in our lives, we may say that:

- I am a teacher.
- I am a husband or a wife.
- I am a parent.
- I am a son or a daughter.
- I am a leader.
- I am an introvert.
- I am successful.
- I am a failure.

These roles are real and important, but they are not the deepest truth of who we are. They come and go throughout our lives, arising and passing as circumstances change. Yet something remains constant and enduring: an awareness in which all these identities appear and disappear; an awareness that has been present from

our first breath to this very moment and has witnessed every role we have played, every emotion we have felt and every identity we have assumed.

Rupert Spira illustrates this beautifully through the story of an actor named John Smith. Each evening John steps onto the stage to play King Lear. He inhabits the role so completely and convincingly that the audience believes every triumph, every grief and every loss. Yet throughout the performance he never ceases to be John Smith. When the play finishes, King Lear disappears, but John Smith remains.

So, it is with us. We too can mistake ourselves for King Lear and forget our true identity as John Smith. Awakening to our true identity begins when we stop mistaking ourselves for the characters we play in the passing drama of our lives and realise that our true and deepest identity is the awareness in which the entire drama unfolds.



Our ego, however, has no interest in our coming to this realisation. The ego is a very limited idea of who we are. It sees only appearances and constantly worries about status, security, approval, comparison and accumulation. It constantly asks questions like: How do I compare? and Am I enough?

But ultimately, the tragedy is not that we have an ego. It is a necessary part of living in the world. The real tragedy is believing that the ego can tell us who we are. As Ram Dass observed, "The ego is a useful servant but a terrible master."

Awakening begins the moment we recognise the voice in our heads as the ego, and realise that we are not that voice but the one who is aware of it. We begin to understand that we do not have to be imprisoned by it. We begin by asking a very different question, one that is foreign to our ego: Who am I when I no longer need to compare myself to anyone?

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the youngest son, after leaving home, lost his way and drifted from his intimate relationship with his father. He wandered in foreign lands, driven by separation and ego-driven priorities. Only when he recovered his identity as a loved child of his father was his humanity restored.

There is something in the human spirit that yearns to reach beyond itself. We seek truth, beauty, meaning, and transcendence. As St Augustine prayed, "Our hearts remain restless until they rest in God." Beneath all our ego's desires lies a deeper one: the desire to return consciously to the Source of our Being.

As our awakening deepens, we become less concerned with protecting the fragile identities we have built and realise that we are not isolated, separate selves but expressions of Divine Consciousness itself. Spirit immersed in the experience of being human.

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

Meister Eckhart

All creation has its source in God. The same Divine Life that gives birth to the stars flows through every living thing and breathes within each of us. At the heart of every person burns a Sacred Spark, Divine Consciousness itself.

This Sacred Spark is kindled by love and revealed whenever love finds expression in compassion, kindness and generosity. We are holiness breathed into being; living expressions of Divine Consciousness. This is our true identity.

Every great spiritual tradition points to this same mystery. Whether it speaks of the Christ within, Buddha nature, Atman, or the indwelling Spirit, each reminds us that the sacred is not distant but lives at the very centre of our being.

As we awaken, we begin to recognise this same Spark in everyone we meet. We realise that we belong to one another, and the life flowing through me is the same as the life flowing through you. Compassion stops being merely a moral obligation and becomes one heart recognising itself in another. Another person's suffering is no longer someone else's burden; it is our own as well. Another person's joy expands our own hearts.

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

Meister Eckhart

Alan Watts reminded us that we do not 'come into' this world; we come out of it, as leaves from a tree. As a leaf unfurls from a tree, a vibrant expression of its life,

so too do we emerge from the Divine and are an embodiment of Divine love, generosity and compassion in the world.

I have always loved walking through parks in autumn, especially among the fallen brown leaves. They have fulfilled their purpose. In spring and summer, they clothed the trees in beauty, danced in the wind, offered shade, and delighted the eye with their changing colours. Now they return quietly to the earth that first nourished them. Their journey is complete.

Whenever I walk among them, I find myself whispering a simple prayer: May I, too, leave behind a little more beauty, a little more kindness, and a little more love than I found. And when my own season is complete, may I return peacefully to the Love from which I came.

A wave is never separate from the ocean. It is the ocean, expressed in a unique and beautiful form. For a brief moment, it rises, gathers strength, catches the light, and moves across the water in its own distinctive shape. Then, as naturally as it appeared, it returns to the vastness from which it arose. Nothing is lost. The ocean endures.

And so, it is with the Divine and us.

We are not separate beings struggling to find God, but unique expressions of the One Life. Like waves rising from the ocean, each of us carries something of the Infinite into the world, then gently returns to the mystery from which we came. We return to the Love that has always held us, just as every wave returns to the ocean, never having been separate from it.

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.

The great wisdom traditions, despite their different languages and symbols, point to the same profound truth. Divine Consciousness dwells within every human being. As we awaken to that Presence within ourselves, we begin to recognise it in one another. The journey is not towards a distant God but into an ever-deepening awareness of the One Life in whom we live, move and have our being.

Part 2

INTERBEING: WHO ARE WE TOGETHER?

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

Rumi

Inextricably linked by the Sacred Spark within each of us, we are never truly separate from the Divine or from one another. The Divine wears every face, and every heart beats to the same sacred rhythm. 'Otherness' is an illusion.

As we awaken to this deeper reality of who we really are, we recognise that the same Divine Consciousness burning within us also burns within everyone we meet. Beneath our many differences lies the One Life expressing itself in countless forms.

The problem with the world is that we have forgotten that we belong to each other.

Mother Teresa

This truth is recognised in different ways in different cultures.

In India, it is spoken every time people greet one another with the word 'Namaste': the Divine presence in me honours the Divine presence in you.

In southern Africa, the same wisdom is expressed in the word 'Ubuntu.' It reminds us that we become fully human only through our relationships with others. My humanity is bound up in yours. What humanises you humanises me. What diminishes you diminishes me. I can never be all I can be until you have the opportunity to be all that you can be.

Nature also offers us a living image of Ubuntu.

The magnificent Redwood can live for a thousand years and rise more than thirty stories into the sky. Yet these giants have surprisingly shallow roots. What enables them to endure centuries of storms is not the strength of a single tree, but the way their roots spread outward, intertwining with and supporting countless others. The

Redwood does not grow tall alone. Its strength lies in belonging and relationship. In its own quiet way, the Redwood practises Ubuntu.

A similar spirit is evident in the Hawaiian greeting 'Aloha.' More than a simple hello or goodbye, Aloha recognises the sacred life we share. It is a way of living marked by love, respect, compassion, and reverence for all creation. It reminds us that every meeting is an encounter with the same Life, expressed in another form.

The great mystics have long taught that beneath creation's diversity lies a profound unity. Today, modern science also reveals a universe of astonishing relationships, interdependence and connectedness. Although science and spirituality speak in different languages, both can awaken wonder before the mystery that nothing exists entirely on its own.

Quantum physicist John Hagelin has often spoken of a deeply interconnected universe. His work invites us to contemplate a reality woven together in ways that challenge our ordinary sense of separateness. For many people, this resonates with the ancient intuition that life is not a collection of isolated fragments but a web of relationships in which everything belongs. Albert Einstein taught that when we experience ourselves, our thoughts, and feelings as separate from the rest, it is a kind of 'optical delusion of our consciousness.'

Whether we listen to the wisdom of the mystics or the discoveries of science, both invite us beyond the illusion of separateness towards an experience of deeper unity, compassion and belonging.

Beneath our apparent separateness, we are one.

This is surely the heart of Jesus' command to love your neighbour as yourself. Perhaps he was inviting us to something even deeper: love your neighbour because, at the deepest level of reality, your neighbour is not separate from you; they are you.

I once came across a photograph taken in Damascus in 1899 that tells an unforgettable story. It shows a very small Christian man named Samir, who could not walk. A blind Muslim man named Mohammed carried him on his back. Mohammed could not see the road ahead, so Samir became his eyes. Samir could

not walk, so Mohammed became his legs. Together, they navigated the crowded streets of Damascus, each completing what the other lacked. Both men were orphans, shared a tiny room, and rarely spent time apart. During the day, Samir earned a little money by telling stories in a local café, while Mohammed sat nearby, delighting in his friend's gift for bringing tales to life.

One day, Mohammed returned to their room to find Samir had died. For seven days he wept. When people asked how two men from different religions could have shared such a deep friendship, Mohammed placed his hand on his heart.

"In here," he said, "we were the same person."

I am not all that God is, yet I am not separate from God. I am not you, yet I am not separate from you. Within the mystery of this realisation lies the wellspring of great love, compassion, and peace.

Children often see what adults have forgotten: in the way of love, the self and the other are one.

I was once having lunch in a small restaurant in Lima. As people quietly enjoyed their meals, a poor man entered, carrying a small box of sweets, hoping to earn a little money in the only dignified way he knew. Beside him walked his young son. Some diners grew uncomfortable and complained to the waiter about the presence of this unwelcome intruder. Before long, the staff began to usher the man towards the door, politely but firmly. Yet while all this was unfolding, something else was happening that most adults never noticed.

The little boy wandered into a quiet corner of the restaurant, where he met another boy of about the same age, the son of one of the wealthier families. Within moments, they were laughing together, inventing games and enjoying the effortless friendship that seems to come so naturally to children. While the adults quietly defended invisible boundaries of wealth, class, and social status, the children saw none of them. They did not see a rich child and a poor child. They did not see privilege and poverty. They saw another child.

Watching them that day, I realised that perhaps we are not born believing we are separate, but that separation is something we learn. Before we learn to divide the world into us and them, friend and stranger, worthy and unworthy, we encounter one another as fellow human beings.

Perhaps this is why Jesus said that unless we become like little children, we cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Awakening is a return to that childlike way of seeing. The Gospel makes it clear that unless we become like these little children, our potential to experience the Divine and the 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 Gospel's teaching, and our humanity will remain impaired and incomplete.

Beneath all that divides us, 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 calls us home, calling us beyond fear, beyond the illusion of separation from one another or from the Divine.

Part 3

HOW SHOULD WE BE IN THE WORLD: 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 Divine enters the world, not through extraordinary events, but through ordinary people who allow love to flow through their lives.

Swami Ramdas from India speaks to this truth:

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.

Through ordinary acts of kindness, generosity, justice, and compassion, love becomes visible in the world. Our hands can heal, our voices can encourage, our

eyes can notice those who feel invisible, and our presence can be a place of peace for another person.

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.

Few modern stories express this truth more movingly than 'Society of the Snow', the remarkable story of survival after a plane crash in the Andes. One survivor, Arturo, reflects on how he discovered God made visible through the actions of his friends:

I believe in the God that Roberto keeps in 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 came from.

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, I saw Edmund's face clearly in the life and relationships of this wonderful community. It no longer mattered that the statue had lost its face. Edmund's face was visible in the life of the community.

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.

Bishop John Shelby Spong

Christians believe that in Jesus we have an undistorted picture of the Divine. In his life and ministry, love became visible, tangible and concrete. Those who encountered Jesus experienced not merely a remarkable teacher, but a new way of seeing God, themselves and the world.

Jesus did not come to establish a religion or an institution. He proclaimed the Kingdom of God, a vision of humanity transformed by Divine love, justice and compassion. As Marcus Borg observed, Jesus was not primarily a teacher of what to believe. He was a guide on a path of transformation, inviting people to move from conventional ways of living into a life centred on God.

Shine through us, and be so in us that every soul we encounter may feel your presence within us.

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

Jesus and the other sages, saints and prophets, challenge us to recognise the Divine shining through every face. To see the world through the eyes of the Divine. We are also tasked with making Divine love visible in the ordinary circumstances of everyday life.

There is a beautiful story about a grandmother shopping for gifts for her grandchildren.

In a toy store, she noticed a small homeless girl peering through the window. Moved by 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."

May this be true of us as well.

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

We are created from love, by love and for love. Our task is simply to let that love flow through us as naturally as fragrance leaves a flower.

When our hearts ache for others' suffering, 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 the Divine compassion.

We should aspire to become transparent to the Divine light we all hold, 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.'

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." This is our vocation too. To become instruments through whom the Divine music of love, compassion and peace is played. The world is waiting for the song only each of us can sing.

Our purpose is not as complicated as we often imagine. It is to awaken to the Divine Life already within us and to allow that life to flow through us into others' lives.

Our calling is simply this: to become the loving, compassionate, just and inclusive face of the Divine for everyone we meet.

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

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

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 replied: 'You bite because it is your nature. I rescue because it is mine. I will always rescue you, regardless of the danger, because that's who I am!'

May this also be who we are!

To experience the Divine. To embody the Divine. To let our lives speak so loudly that words become unnecessary.

Our lives become our practice.

Part 4

RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF GOD

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

God is for everyone.

Divine Consciousness transcends religious denominations, traditions, creeds and ethnicities. No religion or faith can own or limit the boundless flow of Divine love and compassion.

At their best, religions can guide their followers to awaken to who they really are, become more loving, kind and compassionate, and to recognise and celebrate our connection with one another and with God. Their task is to inspire, direct and nurture the seeds of the search for unity with the Divine that already lie within each human heart.

The highest expressions of any religious faith lie not in articulating beliefs or performing rituals, but in kindness, compassion, and a commitment to universal justice. To work for the common good is the greatest creed of all.

The truth of our religion is ultimately revealed not by what we profess but by how we live: how we treat the vulnerable, welcome the stranger, respond to suffering and recognise the dignity of every human being.

There is a story about a religious person who dreams that he dies and meets the Lord at the gates of paradise. The Lord asks him whether he knows why he has been blessed with entry to paradise. The man recounts all his religious duties, fasting and praying, attending services, but none of these acts of piety has saved him. Finally, the Lord asks 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.'

So much energy is expended in arguing over which religion is right and who holds the truth. However, as Swami Agnivesh from India reminds us, the enemies of religions are not other religions. The enemies of religion are poverty, injustice, illiteracy, exploitation, discrimination, and all other forces which subvert the spiritual goal of fullness of life for all people.

The world doesn't need more adherents to religious belief systems. Rather, it needs more people who embody the teachings of love, compassion and justice, which abound in all faith traditions. The truth of our religion is ultimately revealed not by what we profess but by how we live. As Tolstoy once said: 'Don't tell me about your religion, let me see your religion in your actions.'

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 he had faced was. The monk replied that the greatest danger he had faced in the gulag was losing compassion for the Chinese guards who oppressed him.

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

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. As one moves down each finger, they merge at the palm. When one journeys deeply into different religious traditions, they converge at a common Source, an encounter with the Divine.

The scriptures of the great religious traditions can reflect the same Divine voice speaking in different languages. I say 'can' because, sadly, the opposite is also true. The God of love and compassion is betrayed whenever scriptures, teachings and practices are used to alienate, condemn or marginalise others.

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

In *The River Flows*, I wrote of the predicament of Gabriel Marlowe. I sense that he is not alone in his searching:

A religion that prioritised protecting its theology, doctrines and boundaries, defining who belonged and who did not, failed to inspire him or help him in his search for a deeper way of living. Gabriel felt increasingly alienated yet also guilty about being in this space.

He still strongly believed that the Gospel, at its best, was a force for liberation; a call to kindness, justice, and compassion. He believed that Jesus lived and died for a world in which inclusion and the fullness of life were offered to all. However, Gabriel increasingly struggled to reconcile this vision of humanity with narrow, inward-looking forms of religion.

The richness of religious traditions as guides to the experience of the Divine is obscured by moralising, intellectualising and claims of exclusivity. Insights into the spiritual journey can be clouded by the accumulation of rigid practices, ideologies and dogma.

As a river flows, it picks up sediment and debris from its banks and deposits them along the way. What remains constant is the flow of the river itself, not the ever-changing contents it carries. Likewise, the beliefs and cultural traditions that abound in our religions are not essential to the flow of Divine love. Perhaps what we once thought was essential was only an attachment to the shape the river of faith once took. For many, it now takes a different shape.

There is an ancient spiritual image of a finger pointing towards the moon. The finger is important because it directs our gaze towards something beyond itself, but the tragedy would be to become so fascinated with the finger that we never look up and see the moon.

Religion is the finger. Its scriptures, rituals, doctrines and traditions can point us towards the Divine, but they are not ends in themselves. The danger comes when we mistake the pathway for the destination, defending and idolising the finger while forgetting the moon it points to.

The Buddha offered another image: religion can be like a raft used to cross a river. The raft is important because it carries us towards the other shore, but it would make little sense, having crossed the river, to lift the raft onto our shoulders and carry it on our onward journey. The raft has served its purpose.

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.

Lives are not transformed by ideas, beliefs, and formulations. Transformation occurs through a change in consciousness: a new way of seeing ourselves, each other and the world. I spent many years studying theology and religion. These courses may have helped me articulate language about God, but they rarely led me to experience and know Divine Consciousness in my life.

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.

Simply believing in or knowing about God is a poor substitute for the living experience of the Divine manifesting through every moment of your life.

There is a wonderful story about a holy man who put a sign outside his home: For two cents, I will give you an experience of God. When people came to see him, he asked them to put their money in a small bowl. He then gave each person a few

grains of sugar and simply told them to eat. He did not ask them to define sweetness or debate whether their understanding of it was correct. He simply invited them to taste.

“What is sweetness?” he asked. “Just as sweetness can only truly be known through experience, so it is with God!”

Passing on faith is not a call to transmit theologies, beliefs, and practices, or to hand on doctrines and traditions. It is not about getting people to believe the right things to reach some special place. It is about helping others experience and enact the Divine in their lives as expansively as possible, not by persuasion but by encounter. It is about awakening them to what already burns within: the living presence of the Divine.

Passing on faith is about inspiring people to see the world with Divine eyes. To look at the world through human eyes, but see it through hearts of love, compassion, inclusion, and justice.

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

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 formation of young people.

The ‘pond’ of spirituality and philosophy in which we educate them should be large enough to allow them to grow, explore, and maximise their spiritual and human potential. The opposite is to confine and limit, like small fish in a small tank.

BOOK TWO

Living Our Common Heart

Part 1

OUR RESPONSE TO THE POOR AND MARGINALISED

Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! Whom do you worship in this lonely, dark corner of a temple with all the doors shut? Open your eyes and see, Thy God is not before you! 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 your holy mantle, and, even like him, come down on the dusty soil!

Rabindranath Tagore's 'Gitanjali'

The God 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.

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

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, she said that receiving the name card was the first time in her life 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 God 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 García 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: whether we cared for the poor. Did we give bread to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked?

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

At the end of 2023, I had the privilege of meeting Pope Francis at his Vatican residence, along with seven educators from around the world. It was one of the highlights of my life, made even more special by the added honour of serving as the Pope's translator during the gathering.

While waiting for Pope Francis to enter the room, I asked Jose Maria, an Argentinian who had worked closely with Francis for several decades, whether there was any special protocol to observe when meeting the Pope. I thought it a fair question from a very nervous translator!

I was completely surprised when Jose Maria laughed out loud and replied, 'Wayne, this is Francis. His only protocol is the Gospel!'

Of course, what Jose Maria said was true. The humility and simplicity of Francis were matched only by his passion for education, justice, and the future of our planet.

He consistently prayed for a church 'of' and 'for' the poor:

- A Church that promotes service and compassionate engagement with the world as indispensable to the way we worship the God of love who stands with and for the poor.
- A Church focused on bringing the Kingdom of God and its message of justice into the world, rather than on bringing people into its ranks;
- A Church less concerned with how the world might change it, and more concerned with how it might strive to change the world; and
- A Church that strives ceaselessly to tell the poor and the excluded that God loves them and that the Gospel is good news for them as well.

It was a very different context several years earlier, when a friend and I travelled to Sri Lanka to meet the theologian Fr Tissa Balasuriya. We 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 45 minutes to the outskirts of Colombo, to a slum area where 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.

Pope Francis and Fr Tissa probably never met in person, but they spoke with a common heart. Their message is that we see and recognise the face of God most clearly in the poor; that we cannot reflect on the Reign of God, God’s vision for a just and inclusive world, without focusing on the plight of the poor and on what the Gospel’s message of ‘good news’ means for them.

If our understanding of the Gospels does not eventually lead us into deeper compassion, greater justice and solidarity with those on the margins, we may have missed its heart. As Pope Francis reminded us, “The Gospel of the marginalised is where our credibility is discovered and revealed.”

St. Oscar Romero of El Salvador said the same thing using more blunt language:

... 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!

Along with these great heroes, may the Gospel of the poor and disenfranchised be our only protocol as well.

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.

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 that 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 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 the situation was far worse 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.

The God of love, compassion and justice sides with the poor and those at the margins of life. We most authentically and completely reverence and worship God by serving the poor.

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

In Spanish, the verb 'optar' implies making a significant choice in accordance 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. As Fr Tony Herbert wrote:

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.

To stand with the poor invokes what martyred El Salvadoran Jesuit Rutilio Grande called an 'impossible neutrality'. This option is not merely 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 raises disturbing questions about how things are and why.

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 slept on the footpath in an area of the city just beside an ATM. 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 the flow of wealth from the machine that adorns their living space, the way 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, only to be cleared away in the mornings so 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 yet as different as 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 allows this stark separation to exist?
- How do these children develop 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?

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.

...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

To stand with the poor is to stand with God. To listen to them is to hear God's heartbeat. To love them is to make Good News present in the world.

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 a distance, 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 at this restaurant, you are served a complimentary bowl of roasted corn as an appetiser, and you might be offered a bowl of peanuts, which is very cheap and 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.

Jesus showed that God was not pleased with the blind following of laws and rituals, including those of ritual purity. He entered the lives of the victims of these laws, whom he called the 'little ones': those with disabilities, the lepers, the elderly,

those who knew nothing of the law, those who mourn, the hungry, the persecuted, the widows.

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

Jesus's commitment to inclusion directly challenged 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. He taught his disciples to pray for the coming of God's Reign, which must surely have been interpreted as subversion. One could say that Jesus's commitment to inclusion ultimately cost him his life.

Some might say that it is easier to embrace radical inclusion or an option for the poor in India, Africa, and other 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.

Conversion does not require rejection of one's religious belief system in favour of another. It is accepting responsibility for bringing the Divine vision for how the world should be into reality. It is a commitment to see with Divine eyes and live justly with kindness and compassion. This conversion of the 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 a young man who had recently finished his medical degree, Ernesto travelled with a friend 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.

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, warning that it is dark and dangerous, and that Ernesto has suffered from chronic asthma all his life. On the island's shore, however, the lepers encourage him to keep swimming towards them.

For me, this is a wonderful image of conversion: movement toward 'the other', 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 choice; 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.

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 for choosing 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 greatly.

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:

And so, friends, what are the 'knots' we must untie to free ourselves to more fully commit to the marginalised, the voiceless, and those who must be included?

Part 2

CARPE DEUM

Living with Presence, Gratitude, Equanimity

We have two lives.

And the second begins when you realise you only have one.

Mário Raul de Moraes Andrade

If all we do in life is go around the sun 70 or so times on Planet Earth, eating, sleeping, working and squeezing in a bit of pleasure here and there, then life is mere existence. Human beings need to live deliberately, not by default.

Paul Arnott

We can accumulate possessions, build careers, fulfil obligations, and meet society's expectations. We are busy, productive, and respectable. Yet beneath the surface, there can remain a quiet ache: the sense that something essential has been missed.

I remember reading about Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's research on death and dying. She suggested that those who approach death with the most fear and trepidation are the people who feel that they never lived fully while they had the chance.

To reach life's end and realise that we have never truly lived. We may have existed. We may have survived. We may have outwardly achieved much. Yet we may never have fully entered into the wonder and mystery of being alive.

The tragedy for most is not that life is short. The deeper tragedy is that we are so often absent from the life we have. This life we are leading is not a rehearsal. This moment, with all its imperfections, joys, disappointments, challenges, and possibilities, is the only life we are guaranteed.

The truth is that we exist on Earth for a brief time. Life is an experience that is always interrupted. We should consistently reflect on what it would feel like to be in the final days of our life.

Henry David Thoreau pondered this truth deeply. Troubled by lives consumed by busyness, conformity, and endless striving, he withdrew for a time to Walden Pond. He wanted, as he put it, to live deliberately and confront the essential facts of life:

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.... I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily... as to put to rout all that was not life.

The truth is that many of us live elsewhere. We dwell in memories of the past, anxieties about the future, and endless plans for tomorrow. Meanwhile, life unfolds before us, scantily noticed. A sunrise, the laughter of a grandchild, the companionship of a friend, the touch of someone we love; these are the simple gifts of ordinary days, not interruptions to life. They are life itself.

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.

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

The story of Don Quixote has always spoken to me.

To many, he appears foolish: a dreamer tilting at windmills. Yet beneath the apparent craziness lies a profound truth. Don Quixote refuses to surrender his vision of what life might become. He reminds us that there is also a kind of madness in seeing only life as it is and never imagining what it could be. When Don Quixote died, all the people whom he loved were around him, weeping for his death. He wasn't weeping, for he had lived! Don Quixote engaged in life, lived the dream of its possibilities and gave his all.

Few literary figures have embodied life to the fullest as Zorba the Greek.

Zorba is no saint. He is impulsive, passionate, imperfect, and gloriously alive. He dances, laughs, loves, grieves, and embraces life in all its messy fullness. What draws me to Zorba is not his perfection but his vitality. He reminds us that life is meant to be lived, not pondered, experienced, not merely analysed.

Deep down we all want to engage in life as active participants, not passive observers. The true tragedy for us is not death but what we allow to die in us while we are still alive.

There is something in the human spirit that longs for the adventure of becoming who we are capable of becoming. The people who inspire us most are not usually those who lived the safest lives. They are those who dared to live authentically. They have listened to the deeper call within themselves, followed their convictions, loved passionately, served generously, and risked failure in pursuit of something worthwhile.

May we have the courage to live so fully and passionately that, when our time comes, we can lay the torch down with gratitude and simply say: I was here. I was awake. I lived.

I try hard to live in conscious gratitude for everything that happens in my life. A brush with cancer some years ago taught me this priority in a way no philosophy ever could. When our mortality is no longer an abstract ponderance, priorities become clearer. The trivial begins to fall away. Gratitude has become less an occasional feeling and more a deliberate practice.

Living with gratitude changes everything. It shifts our attention from what is missing to what is present, from scarcity to abundance, from entitlement to appreciation, and from complaint to wonder. The grateful person understands that happiness is often found not in acquiring more, but in appreciating what already

is. A simple meal becomes a feast. A house becomes a home. A stranger becomes a friend. An ordinary day becomes extraordinary.

Practising gratitude invites joy into our lives. As authors Brené Brown and Br. David Steindl-Rast remind us, it's not joy that makes us grateful; it's living with gratitude that makes us joyful.

Gratitude separates privilege from entitlement. It celebrates what we have in our lives rather than lamenting what we don't have. To live gratefully is to measure abundance not by what we possess, but by how deeply we appreciate what has been given.

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 with a very advanced case of leprosy who found it very difficult to walk. She greeted us with a smile and seemed very excited. We learned that this woman had travelled for 4 hours to reach the colony to receive a pair of sandals, specially designed for people with leprosy and made from discarded truck and car tyres. The lady needed these sandals since people with leprosy lose feeling in their limbs; stronger protection is necessary, particularly for the feet. They often suffer infections from nail injuries 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, overwhelmingly happy and excited. I spoke with the cobbler, who showed me the sandals the lady was about to receive. I must admit 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 large enough to cover the stump where this lady's foot used to be.

I was privileged to be in the same room and to see the delight and thankfulness 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 this woman showed at receiving her simple sandals. In fact, I've seen 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

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

Epictetus

Viktor Frankl, who survived the German concentration camps, reminded us that everything can be taken from us but the last of human freedoms: the freedom to choose our spirit in any circumstance. The freedom to control how we respond to these circumstances.

Roberto de Vincenzo, an Argentine golfer who became quite famous in the 1960s, did not have to suffer the horrors of a concentration camp, but his attitude to life is inspirational.

There is a famous story about Roberto winning a golf tournament and receiving 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 a woman approached him, holding a baby. 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 the woman, saying, "There you go, lady. I hope your child enjoys many happy days."

A week later, as he arrived at another PGA tournament, an official approached 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.

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 an advocacy of passive acceptance and resignation in the face of wrongdoing or injustice. Krishnamurti is offering a way to experience inner freedom and release from attachment to outcomes.

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!

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. When we live a life of worry and concern for what may transpire, we cannot live fully, joyfully and freely in the present moment. We are no longer prisoners of the past or anxious about the future. We are free.

The trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you're still a rat.

Lily Tomlin

On King Island, off Tasmania's north-west coast, the winds are so relentless that many trees grow permanently at an angle. Something similar can happen to us. Life's pressures and expectations can gradually bend us out of shape until we start believing that living hurried, distracted, and unbalanced lives is normal.

We can experience life and yet miss its meaning. Nothing is truly ours except the time entrusted to us, and in the long story of human history, one lifetime is only the flicker of an eyelid. While everyone dies, not everyone really lives. Each day, each hour, each minute invites us to begin again.

Just recently, I watched the movie 'Perfect Days' for the third time.

The movie follows Hirayama, a quiet, middle-aged man who works as a public toilet cleaner in Tokyo. His life is simple and repetitive: he rises before dawn, meticulously cleans public toilets, listens to cassette tapes, often with a warm smile, reads books, and photographs trees. He finds quiet joy in these everyday routines, his eyes reflecting the subtle beauty he sees.

As the film unfolds, brief encounters with family, colleagues, and strangers gently reveal the hidden depths of his character and hint at a past he has chosen to leave behind. Rather than being about toilets, the film explores dignity, presence, and the discovery of beauty and meaning in life's ordinary moments, all through the lens of a deeply human soul.

The beautiful movie left me with a question: Am I truly awake to the fullness of my life? Not merely awake enough to meet responsibilities and move through familiar routines, but awake to the privilege of being alive; present enough to inhabit this moment rather than pass through it on the way to somewhere else.

The deeper tragedy is not simply that life passes quickly, but that we are often absent while it is happening. Our bodies occupy one place while our minds inhabit another: replaying old conversations, rehearsing future ones, revisiting disappointments, and imagining difficulties. Meanwhile, the only life we can actually live unfolds before us, unnoticed.

Perhaps wisdom is recovering the eyes of a child: learning to look again with curiosity, gratitude, and openness. Children examine insects, collect stones, chase butterflies, splash through puddles, and gaze at clouds. They are not travelling towards life; they are already in it. In adulthood, many of us lose this wonder. We become efficient and productive but gradually stop seeing, so accustomed to the ordinary that we no longer recognise how extraordinary life is.

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 of becoming free and equal to the call of your destiny. That you would gather yourself and carefully decide how to live the life you love now.

John O'Donohue

As we grow older, another truth becomes increasingly clear: life is fragile. None of us knows how much time remains. This awareness need not make us fearful. It can make us grateful. It can encourage us to stop postponing life, stop waiting, and stop assuming there will always be another opportunity.

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.

One day, each of us will hand back the torch of life entrusted to us for a brief moment. The question is not how long we carried it, but how brightly it burned. Did we love? Did we grow? Did we awaken? Did we contribute? Did we become ourselves fully?

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.

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.

One day, each of us will reach the end of our journey. I doubt we will wish for more emails, meetings, or possessions. Our thoughts will turn to the people we loved, the kindness we received, the forgiveness we offered, the beauty we

noticed, and the moments when we felt deeply connected to one another, to creation, and to the mystery that accompanied us.

The invitation is simple: wake up to the life already yours. Receive each day as a gift. Notice beauty. Listen deeply. Forgive quickly. Love generously. Walk gently on the earth.

The ancient Egyptians believed that upon their deaths, they would be asked two questions by the gods, 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 became a sacred charge in life and the only way to obtain eternal happiness.

None of us lives perfectly. We will become distracted, lose our way, make mistakes, and sometimes forget what truly matters. Yet each morning offers another beginning: another chance to pay attention, notice beauty, forgive, and begin again. Perhaps, when all is said and done, the great spiritual questions are surprisingly simple: Did we live fully? Did we love? Were we kind? Did we have the courage to be ourselves? Did we notice the beauty that was here all along?

Part 3

THE HERO'S JOURNEY

The Hero is the chooser at the crossroads of life. The Hero's life course is never merely random or automatic. The first choice of the Hero is the choice to be one: to live with full consciousness and responsibility.

Joseph Campbell

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

The Greek roots of the word suggest that the hero is one who can choose. The hero interprets life through her/his own experience, questioning and interrogating the culture they live in:

- Who am I?
- What truly matters?
- What is my life for?
- How should I live?

We can drift through life according to other people's expectations, or we can take responsibility for becoming the authors of our own lives. The journey begins when we realise we have this choice. The heroic path is the path of truth: being faithful to our own unique personhood.

The path of the hero is rarely easy. As in the stories of old, every hero encounters dragons. For us, these dragons are not found in distant caves or mythical lands; they live within us. They appear as fear, self-doubt, prejudice, insecurity, resentment, attachment, and complacency. They whisper that we are not ready, not capable, or not worthy, and they urge us to remain within the boundaries of what is familiar and safe.

Fear may be the greatest dragon of all. It keeps us silent when we should speak, passive when we should act, and willing to settle for less than we are capable of becoming. The heroic journey does not require the absence of fear but the refusal to let fear determine the course of our lives.

As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world...as in being able to remake ourselves. You must be the change you wish to see in the world.

Gandhi

For the hero, fulfilment is found not in what we accumulate, but in what we contribute; not in what we possess, but in what we become. The journey ceases

to be merely about personal growth and becomes an act of participation in something larger than ourselves.

As the journey unfolds, something remarkable begins to happen: the focus gradually shifts from ourselves to others. We may begin by seeking our own happiness and fulfilment, but we continue by discovering our profound connection with all life. The deeper we travel into our own humanity, the more clearly we recognise our connection with all people and all of life.

Joseph Campbell expressed this beautifully when he observed that, unlike classical heroes, we are not going out to save the world, but to save ourselves; in doing so, we help save the world. The influence of a vital person vitalises. Every person who becomes more conscious, compassionate, courageous, and loving contributes to the transformation of the whole.

There is only one true vocation for everybody; to find the way to yourself. You might end up 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 our inner soul.

Hermann Hesse

The hero is not someone who becomes somebody else, but someone who finally becomes who they were always meant to be. When we follow our own path, dormant forces, faculties, and talents awaken. Our consciousness expands, our vision broadens, and we discover ourselves to be far greater than we imagined. This is the promise of the Hero's Journey: not that we conquer the world, but that we awaken to the extraordinary possibilities hidden within ourselves and within life itself.

If you advance confidently in the direction of your own dreams and endeavour to live the life which you have imagined, you will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.

Henry David Thoreau

BOOK THREE

Educating For Our Common Heart

Part 1

EDUCATING FOR FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY

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.

Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach

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 Paolo 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 the ways they are expected to live. They are passive

consumers of other people's priorities and definitions of what constitutes a happy, successful, and meaningful life.

Years ago, Michael Warren observed that what we are now living is not the culture of the people, but a culture concocted for the people's consumption. I sense that this is even more true these days.

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. It 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.

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 her 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.

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!

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

We all must come to see that the opportunities we enjoy through the good fortune of our birth and the sacrifices of others are not a license to do whatever we please, but rather, a vehicle for service to others and for 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 that does not include love for the least of their neighbours.

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 world's stock of goodness.

You are not here merely to make a living. You are here to enable the world to live more

abundantly, with greater vision and a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world, and you impoverish yourself if you forget your errand.

President Woodrow Wilson

A great danger for education is that it becomes solely focused on helping young people fit into an economy. We educate 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, yet very few Catholics are enrolled. Sr. Cyril Mooney, the dynamic and charismatic former 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. The 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, are required to teach street kids every day; 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 woman of about 15, why her father, who could afford any type of education, chose to send her to Loretto Sealdah. At this school, she had to engage with people from castes and family backgrounds very different from her own, in ways that ran contrary to her religion'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. Loreto Sealdah was not engaged in Catholic training!

Part 2

EDUCATING FOR LIFE AND MEANING

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 about life's sacredness, meaning, and purpose?
- To what avail were my religion lessons when this girl didn't grasp the beauty of her own personhood?

It often seems that formal education falls short in preparing our students for the real issues, decisions, and dilemmas they will face throughout their lives. 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. Yet when we look around at our fragmented world, it doesn't seem to be working very well by osmosis alone.

It's not the answers we teach them to give, but rather the moral questions we teach them to ask that measure the spiritual leadership we give to the emerging generation.

Joan Chittister

The education we provide should present our youth with deep life questions and encourage a lifelong quest for answers that 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 were built by learned engineers, and children were poisoned by educated physicians. Infants were killed by trained nurses. Women and babies were shot by high school and college graduates. Oh, I am suspicious of education. My only request is that you 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, defining the lives of many. Our world is so connected electronically, yet it can be so lacking in human relationships. We have phones and applications to help us to stay connected, yet, in all probability, we live in a time when human beings have never been less connected.

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

TS Eliot

An education for liberation 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. As someone wise once said: The land of too much information is where wonder often goes to die!

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

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. 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!

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 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, reach 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, to bind the wound, to carry the person to safety, and to tend them through recovery. Helping someone else through difficulty is where civilisation starts, Mead said. We are at our best when we serve others.

Compassion is the cornerstone of civilisation.

Tolstoy 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 world's stock of 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.

Part 3

THE ROLE AND VOCATION OF THE EDUCATOR

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

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 that 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 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, 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 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

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 have an indelible impact on the
students we teach.

Not all educators 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'. However, 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 conversation. Others will have to rely solely on the witness and

example they set for 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.

The hero is one who kindles a great light in the world, who sets up blazing torches in the dark streets of life for others 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, well-lived lives for emerging generations.

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!

If you want to be truly understood, you need to say everything three times, in three different ways. Once for each ear... and once for the heart.

Paula Underwood Spencer

The old teacher's adage goes: "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.

Never forget that the heart is the true classroom. Facts may inform the mind, but only what reaches the heart can transform a life. The greatest educators are remembered not merely for filling minds with knowledge, but for awakening hearts to what is true, good, and possible.

Your kindness, authenticity, belief in each young person, and the example of your life will often speak more deeply than your words.

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. What we all learn is that good teaching cannot be reduced to a series of techniques; it comes from the love and integrity of educators.

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 child's soul.

Every child who walks into a classroom is more than a bundle of outcomes waiting to be met. Each carries an unseen story, a hope, and a hidden possibility waiting for someone patient and present enough to notice. This is why presence matters more than any program. Presence in a classroom says to a young person: "I see you. I am here. You matter."

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

This is the story of a primary school teacher. Her name was Mrs Thompson. The story is long but so important. It needs to be included.

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 as she exclaimed how pretty the bracelet was, putting it on and dabbing some 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.

Let's 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 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.

Part 4

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 God 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 God 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 about a grandmother shopping for gifts for her grandchildren. In a toy store, she noticed a small homeless girl peering through the window. Moved by 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 how 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. Along with knowledge and skills, your education has given you 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, prejudices, delusions, and potential nonsense that can masquerade as truth.

Aspire to a life independent of others' approval or good opinion. Unshackle yourself from unexamined opinions and inherited prejudices, and embrace the capacity to question and make meaning, to contribute, and to 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 lived experience. The hero's path involves 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 others' lives 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 stage. This is wonderful. But for most of us, our service will be most needed and valued within 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 we will ever be called to master is the one that 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 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 lay on his deathbed, he bemoaned to his rabbi that he felt like a failure. His rabbi leaned in and asked why, and Akiba confessed that he had not lived as Moses and the saints had. The poor man began to cry, admitting he feared God’s judgement. At this, his rabbi leaned in and whispered gently, “God will not judge Akiba for not being Moses or another saint. 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 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.

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 toward your dreams. Live the life you have imagined.

Thank you. Congratulations. Many blessings to you all.

