

The
BOWERBIRD
COLLECTION

Wisdom for Our Common Heart



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THE BOWERBIRD COLLECTION

Introduction

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

Rumi

The quote from the poet Rumi, which I found through American-Iranian writer Melody Moezzi, has accompanied and inspired me for many years now. In our fractured world, the truth it alludes to speaks for itself.

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 have since realised that I sold the Bowerbird short. I was very surprised when Google also reported this:

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

Curating one's life with intentionality. Isn't that one of the noblest ambitions 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 three 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 from time to time 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, too.

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.

These reflections are not intended to tell anyone what to believe, but to invite us to look more deeply, listen more attentively and live more compassionately. I offer them in the spirit of our common humanity, hoping something in them resonates with you and inspires you.

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

Thich Nhat Hanh

Thank you for journeying with me as we explore Our Common Heart.
Peace and blessings

Wayne

Note:

In this collection, I will use terms like 'God', 'Divine Consciousness', 'The Self', 'Presence' or 'Sacred Spark' to refer to the one ineffable Source of all-embracing love and compassion that transcends all labels, denominations, creeds and ethnicities.

This language helps me, but readers may substitute whatever language speaks to them. Ultimately, though, all names and labels are inadequate.

As Thomas Merton reminded us:

No idea of God, however pure and perfect, is adequate to express God as God really is. Our idea of God tells us more about ourselves than about God.

Thomas Merton

If you read no further, read these two pieces and take them 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)

Sooner or later, everything falls away. You, the work you've done, your successes, large and small, your failures, too. Those moments when you were light, alongside the times you became one with the night. The friends, the people you loved who loved you, those who might have wished you ill- none of this is forever. All of it is soon to go, or going, or long gone. Everything falls away, except the thread you've followed, unknowing, all along. The thread that strings together all you've been and done, the thread you didn't know you were tracking until, toward the end, you see that the thread is what stays as everything else falls away. Follow that thread as far as you can, and you'll find it doesn't end, but weaves into the unimaginable vastness of life. Your life never was the solo turn it seemed to be. It was always part of the great weave of nature and humanity, an immensity we come to know only as we follow our own small threads to the place where they merge with the boundless whole. Each of our threads runs its course, then joins together in life. This magnificent tapestry— this masterpiece in which we live forever.

Parker J Palmer

As by knowing one lump of clay, dear one, we come to know all things made out of clay. They differ only in name and form, while the stuff of which all are made is clay.

As by knowing one gold nugget, we come to know all things made out of gold. They differ only in name and form, while the stuff of which all are made is gold.

So, through spiritual wisdom, we come to know that all of life is one.

In the beginning was only Being, One without a second. There is nothing that does not come from Being.

Of everything, Being is the inmost Self, the Self supreme.

You are that; you are that.

As a tethered bird grows tired of flying about in vain to find a place of rest and settles down at last on its own perch, so the mind, tired of wandering, settles down at last in the Self, to whom it is bound.

All creatures have their source in Being.

You are that; you are that.

As rivers flowing east and west merge in the sea and become one with it, forgetting they were ever separate streams, so do all creatures lose their separateness when they at last merge into pure Being. Of everything, Being is the inmost Self, the truth; the Self supreme.

You are that; you are that!"

From the Chandogya Upanishad

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

We Are More Than The Roles We Play

Like the wonderful actors we admire, we can become fully immersed in playing the roles we believe we are and are expected to be. In doing so, we can forget our deeper identity beyond the roles we play. The actor is always more than the role they play. And so are we.

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; they shape how we function in the world, but they are not the deepest truth of who we are. They come and go throughout our lives, arising and passing as circumstances change.

However, something deeper lives within each of us, present through every role, every success and disappointment, every joy and struggle: an awareness or presence that does not depend on achievement, possessions, approval, or circumstances.

Awareness: Our Essential Self and Deepest Identity

English mystic 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.

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.

Awakening begins when we realise that we are not the roles we play. Our most essential 'self' is the awareness present in the background while all the roles and circumstances of our lives are happening. Success cannot enlarge this awareness, nor can failure diminish it.

The old man picked up a tarnished brass mirror from beside him and held it before Gabriel. "What do you see?" he asked. "My face." "And when you walk away?" "Your mirror stays here." "Does the mirror grow old because an old man looks into it?" "No." "Does it become beautiful because a beautiful woman appears?" Gabriel smiled. "No." "It reflects everything," the old man said, placing the mirror back on the ground. "Awareness is like that."

(From The River Flows)

We can spend so many years identifying with what appeared in the mirror: success, failure, belief, doubt, grief, reputation, recognition. None of those reflections ever reveals our true image and identity. Our deepest identity is the looking itself. The journey is not about discovering a new self, but rather, remembering the Self that has always been present beneath every role we play.

A river remains a river even when it carries branches and debris. The same should apply to us. We are not the stories we gather along the way, the roles we perform, the wounds we carry, or even the beliefs we hold, however intensely. We cannot be reduced to what we carry; we are, in essence, the flow itself.

The roles we play are only garments worn by a deeper and more enduring essence. The river flows beneath everything it carries, just as awareness remains beneath every experience we have. Roles come and go. Thoughts and feelings arise and pass away. Yet the awareness in which they appear remains. I am this, or I am that simply becomes 'I am'. Beyond all labels, thoughts and emotions, I am the Presence of God.

The Ego: The Limited Voice In Our Head

The ego is a useful servant but a terrible master.

Ram Dass

Our ego, however, has no interest in our coming to this realisation.

The ego helps us function in the world, but it offers a very limited idea of who we are. It sees only appearances and is that inner voice constantly seeking approval, security, recognition, and comparison. It constantly asks questions like: How do I compare? Am I enough?

Ultimately, the tragedy is not that we have an ego. The real tragedy is believing that the ego can tell us who we really are.

Awakening begins when we recognise the constant voice in our head 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.

Awakening

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, the youngest son left 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 cherished and loved child of his father was his humanity restored.

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.

What remains is not what we achieve, but how we live.

What remains is not what we gather, but what we give.

What remains is not what we become, but what we recognise ourselves to be.

What remains is what was always there.
Not the roles we have played, but the presence we have brought to them.
Not the outcomes we have achieved, but the love, the kindness, the attention, the care with which we have lived.

(From To Be Is Enough)

The Sacred Spark

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

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

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; the fire of God's presence. We are holiness breathed into being; living expressions of Divine Consciousness. This Spark is kindled by love and revealed whenever love finds expression in compassion, kindness and generosity.

Every great spiritual tradition points to this same mystery. Whether it speaks of the Christ within, Buddha-nature, Atman, or the indwelling Spirit. Despite their different languages and symbols, they point to the same profound truth.

The spiritual journey is not towards a remote and distant God, but awakening to the Divine presence already at the heart of our being.

The Tree

Philosopher 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 embody Divine love, generosity, and compassion in the world.

They resumed sweeping. After a while, the old man stopped and carefully picked up a single fallen leaf. "When this leaf was on the tree," he said, "people admired its beauty." He placed it gently in Gabriel's hand. "Now that it is old and lies on the ground. Has it lost its life and beauty?" Gabriel looked closely. The leaf had begun to curl at the edges, its green softening into brown and gold. "No," he answered quietly. "It is simply changing." The old man nodded. "Everything changes." Then he looked directly into Gabriel's eyes and asked, "But tell me... what is it that notices the change?"

(From The River Flows)

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.

The Wave And The Ocean

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 rather, we are 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 too 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.

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

If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.

Mother Teresa

We are all just walking each other home.

Ram Dass

We Share One Life

We navigate through life by defining ourselves through nationality, religion, race, culture, wealth, politics, and countless other labels. We defend these identities, sometimes even allowing them to drive us apart. Yet beneath these differences lies a deeper truth: we belong to one another because we all share the one Life that animates us.

The same Sacred Spark that burns within me also burns within you. The journey to our true self is always a journey into relationship. The Divine wears every face. Every heart beats to the same sacred rhythm. Every heart carries something of God. Each of us is a unique expression of the one Life, the one Divine Reality, flowing through all creation.

Namaste, Ubuntu And Aloha

Different cultures recognise this truth in different ways.

In India, people say it every time they 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.'

Ubuntu 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.

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 Redwood Tree

The magnificent Redwood tree 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.

Beneath Our Differences: A Common Beat

In one of his most beautiful reflections, the American poet and spiritual writer Mark Nepo describes a fascinating biological phenomenon.

Scientists have observed that when living heart muscle cells from different people are placed together in a dish under the right conditions, the cells settle into a common beat; separate rhythms become a shared pulse.

This incredible phenomenon points to a reality much more profound than cells in a science experiment. As we make our way together in life, a deeper rhythm also draws us toward one another, beneath our apparent differences, toward a common beat.

Love, compassion and forgiveness arise most naturally when we recognise our shared life with others. Interbeing is not an abstract idea but a way of seeing: the discovery that beneath our many identities lies one humanity, one Life expressing itself through countless forms.

To live from this awareness is to become less concerned with proving ourselves right and more committed to understanding, healing and belonging. It is to hear

the common beat that has always been present and to shape our lives to its rhythm.

One With Nature

Dana Sawyer recounts a meeting with a Kogi shaman from Colombia when we were both attending the Parliament of World Religions in Salt Lake City in 2015.

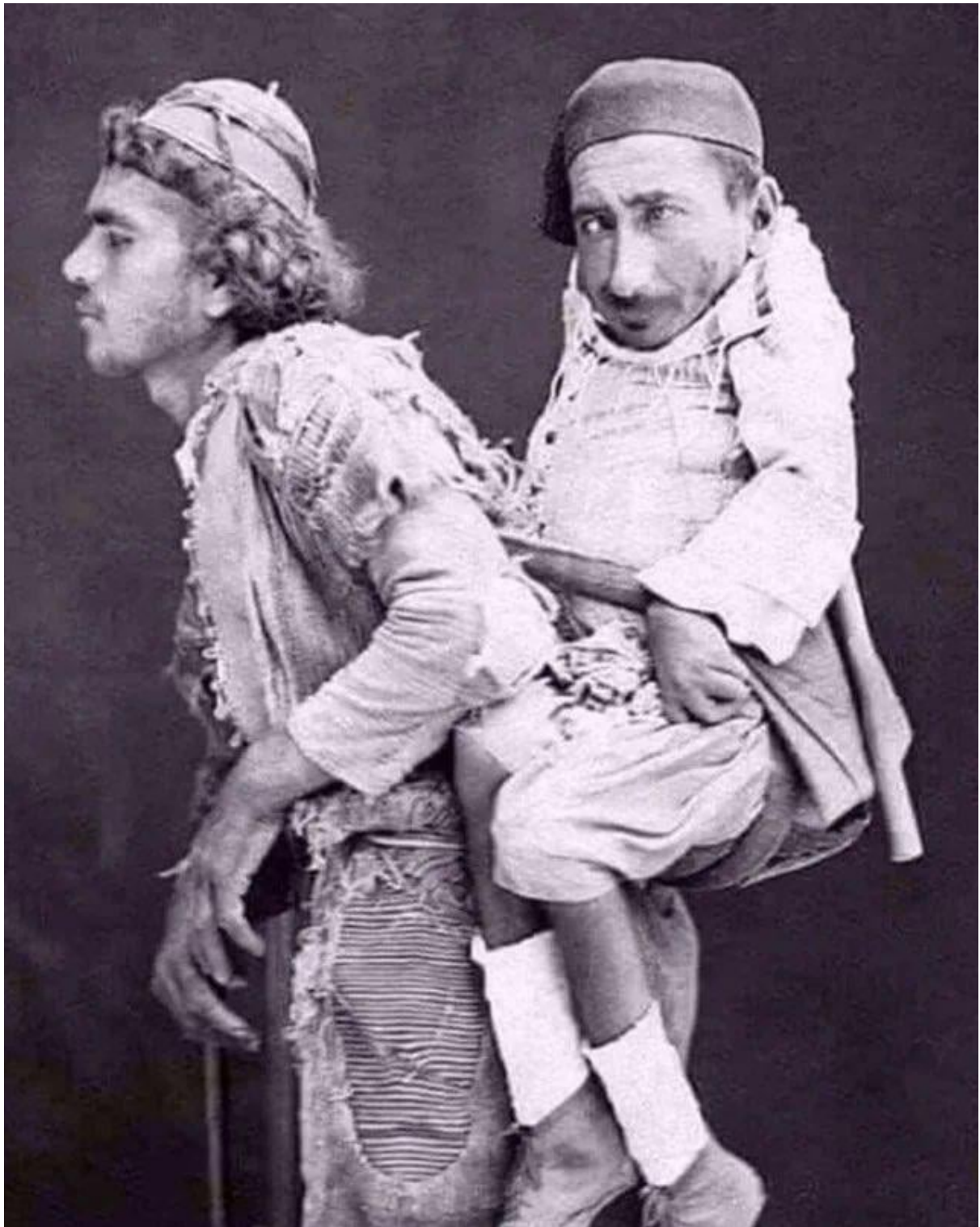
The Shaman observed, “You think of your ‘bodies’ as your arms and legs. But I can cut off my arm and still live. I can even cut off my legs and live. But if I cut myself off from this,” and here he reached for a glass of water on the table in front of him, “I will die.”

The shaman then pointed to the glass and looked out at the audience and asked: “I cannot cut myself off from this and live. So where does my body really end?”

Sawyer concludes, “We are intertwined with the world of water, sunshine, air, and plants—and his example makes this point crystal clear.”

We Are One Person

I once came across this 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 Damascus's crowded streets, each making up for 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 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."

Your Neighbour Is Yourself

Love is not just something we do. It is what naturally arises when we recognise ourselves in another.

This is surely the heart of Jesus' command to love your neighbour as yourself.

He was inviting me to love our neighbour because, at the deepest level of reality, my neighbour is not separate from me; she or he IS me.

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.

Love is not just something we do. It is what naturally arises when we recognise ourselves in another.

Ram Dass

I once heard a story about two police officers in Hawaii.

One day, while driving near a high cliff known as a suicide spot, the officers noticed a young man on the other side of the guardrail, clearly preparing to jump. They accelerated and pulled up quickly nearby. One officer leapt from the car and, just as the man jumped, caught him. The officer was being pulled over the edge when the other arrived just in time to pull them both back to safety.

Later, someone asked the policeman, "Why didn't you let go? You could have died." The officer replied, "I couldn't let go. If I had let that young man go, I couldn't have lived another day."

In moments of crisis like this, we can look beyond surface events and into the true depths of things. The officer saw beyond the apparent separateness of people. In that moment, the police officer and the man on the precipice weren't two individuals but one.

The Wisdom Of Children

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, Peru.

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, who was dirty and dishevelled.

Some diners grew uncomfortable and complained to the waiter about this unwelcome intruder. Before long, the staff began ushering the man toward the door, politely but firmly. Yet while all this was unfolding, something else was happening that most adults never noticed.

The little boy had 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 we learn separation. 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.

One Life, One Humanity

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 all that divides us, one common heart beats, illuminated by the same eternal Flame. Beyond our many differences, one Life, one humanity, one sacred Mystery expresses itself through countless faces, calling us home beyond fear and the illusion of separation from one another or from God.

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

Unity In Action

True love and compassion come from the realisation that we are all one: one Life expressing itself through countless lives.

When we believe we are separate, compassion becomes a duty. When we discover we are not separate, it becomes as natural as breathing; not simply something we do, but what arises when we recognise ourselves in another person.

If we truly belong to one another, compassion is more than kindness or moral obligation; it is our shared unity lived in action, one heart recognising itself in another.

When another's suffering is no longer separate from our own, indifference becomes impossible, and compassion becomes the natural expression of truth.

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Love

God enters the world through ordinary people who let Divine love flow through their lives.

Holiness has never belonged to extraordinary people, but to ordinary people who live intensely and love extraordinarily well.

In simple acts of kindness, generosity, justice and compassion, love becomes visible: hands heal, voices encourage, eyes notice the invisible, and presence becomes peace for another person.

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.

Our Hands, God's Hands

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.

St. Teresa of Avila expressed this beautifully, saying 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 friend 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.

Someone had smashed Edmund's face 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 community's life.

Jesus: Love And Compassion Incarnate

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.

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 said, 'follow me', not 'worship me'. 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.

Our Task Also

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 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.

A beautiful story tells of 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.

It Is Who I Am

Once, a holy man, 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!

From Love, By Love, For Love

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, the Divine heart beats within us. When we long to see others joyful, God sees through our eyes. 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."

Our purpose in this world is to awaken to the Divine Life already within us and let it flow into others' lives, becoming instruments through whom the Divine music of love, compassion and peace is played.

The world is waiting for the song only you can sing.

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

God expects but one thing of you, and that is that you should come out of yourself insofar as you are a created being and let God be God in you.

Meister Eckhart

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

SPIRITUALITY, RELIGION 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. We need no temple, church, mosque, or synagogue; no 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

Transformation: The True Purpose Of Religion

For much of history, spirituality has often been understood through religious beliefs, doctrines, adherence and boundaries. Who is right? Who belongs? What must be believed?

However, spirituality's deepest purpose was never simply to preserve ideas, defend certainty, or create tribes of those who believe correctly. It was never intended to help us escape the world, but rather, to inhabit it more gently, more courageously, and with an open heart.

If the spirituality we identify with does not make us gentler, more open-hearted, more humble and more capable of love, then perhaps we need to ask if it is helpful at all.

Its purpose has always been transformation.

Not transformation into more obedient people, or more secure people, but into more loving and compassionate people, more awake people, more forgiving people, and people capable of seeing beyond themselves.

The measure of any spirituality may be wonderfully simple.

- Does it help us love more deeply?
- Does it make us kinder?

- Does it move our hearts to compassion?
- Does it help us become more deeply human?

Remembering And Awakening

God is never absent, somewhere else or waiting at the end of striving, achievement or perfection.

The journey to transformation is less about achieving perfection or acquiring something new and more about remembering what has always been true.

Remembering who we are. Remembering our connection with one another. Remembering that beneath the differences which divide us, there exists a deeper unity, a shared humanity, and a sacred essence carried within ordinary life.

Spirituality is more concerned with awakening than with believing.

Awakening to ourselves, to others, to the sacred presence woven through all things. Awakening to the possibility that our lives can become vehicles for greater compassion, kindness and peace.

A God Worth Rejecting

Many of us inherited images of God in childhood: a distant figure above us, watching, rewarding, judging and intervening from afar. God became little more than a larger version of ourselves: a celestial authority keeping score, meting out justice, favour, and punishment. Perhaps this explains why some deeply religious people approach death with profound fear. Their faith has sometimes been shaped more by reward and punishment than by trust and surrender.

They face death with lingering anxious questions:

- Have I done enough?
- Will I come up short?

Across history, human beings have projected many of our smallest instincts onto God: exclusion, vengeance, tribalism, superiority, and cruelty. We have imagined a God who chooses some and rejects others. A God more concerned with correct beliefs than compassionate lives. A God willing to condemn, divide and exclude. A God whose love appears conditional. This is a small God. A harsh God. A God that looks less like love and compassion, and more like tyranny and control.

Many who have walked away from religion may not have rejected God at all. Perhaps they have rejected images of God that were too narrow, too fearful or too cruel to begin with. This is a God worth rejecting.

God Is God For Everyone

The boundless flow of Divine love and compassion can never be owned, confined, or dictated by any single religion, faith, church, or tradition. God is not a private possession, held exclusively by one group, creed, or institution. Instead, the great traditions of faith and spirituality are, at their core, simply different paths guiding us toward the same sacred centre. As Richard Rohr maintains, any God worthy of the name must surely transcend labels, doctrines, denominations and boundaries.

How could the source of all life belong exclusively to one religion, one nation or one group of people?

In their deepest wisdom, teachings on love, kindness, compassion, mercy, and justice are all touched by the same radiant Divine presence, echoing through our diverse cultures, symbols, stories, and languages. Within the scriptures and ancient wisdom of these traditions, we hear a similar Divine voice.

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.'

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 Palm And The Fingers

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.

The Highest Religion

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.

Every great wisdom tradition, in its finest moments, seems to point in that direction. They may use different languages, symbols and stories, yet again and again they invite us beyond fear into love, beyond separation into relationship, beyond certainty into wonder, and beyond the restless search for fulfilment into the quiet recognition that what we seek has always been closer than we imagined.

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.

They never claim superiority, enforce exclusion, or demand rigid certainty. Instead, they consistently speak of kindness, humble service, expansive love, profound compassion, and an unwavering commitment to universal justice. To work for the common good is, perhaps, the most authentic expression of faith.

The true calling of religion, then, isn't to fiercely defend its own borders, but to awaken, nourish, and gently guide the longing for unity with the Divine that already resides deep within every human heart.

To work for the common good is the greatest creed of all.

The world needs less argument and more understanding. It does not need more people convinced of their own rightness as much as it needs people willing to listen deeply, forgive generously and love courageously.

Not What We Profess But How We Live

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.

A story tells of a religious person who dreams 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.'

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.

A Tiredness With Traditional Forms

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.

A religion that prioritises protecting its theology, doctrines and boundaries, defining who belonged and who did not, fails to inspire or help people in their search for a deeper way of living.

Many believe that the Gospel, at its best, is a force for liberation; a call to kindness, justice, and compassion. That Jesus lived and died for a world in which inclusion and the fullness of life are offered to all. However, they increasingly struggle to reconcile this vision of humanity with narrow, inward-looking forms of religion.

The spirituality they seek holds that compassion matters more than moral perfection, that kindness is our highest calling, that the call to justice cannot be separated from prayer and worship, and that the measure of any faith is not how tightly it holds its beliefs but how deeply it enlarges our hearts.

The River Of Faith

God makes the rivers to flow. They tire not, nor do
they cease from flowing.
May the river of my life flow into the sea of love
that is the Lord.
Guard us against all danger, O Lord.
Lead us from darkness into light.

The Rig Veda

As the river flows, it picks up sediment and debris from its banks and deposits them along the way. What remains constant is the river's flow itself, not the ever-changing contents it carries. Perhaps faith is like that too.

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 may now take a different shape.

Some think of faith as the careful holding of the right things: right beliefs, right practices, right forms, right words. A river suggests something different. Not holding, but flowing; a living current. Not the absence of sediment, but the capacity to keep moving through it.

Our religions can be like a river's banks. They can give shape and direction. They can help us know where to begin and keep us from getting lost. Without banks, you know, the water spreads everywhere and is lost. But sometimes people mistake the banks for the river itself.

Every great wisdom tradition produces both guardians and mystics. The guardians protect the banks. The mystics enter the river. Both are necessary. Without banks, the river loses direction. Without the flowing water, the banks enclose nothing but an empty channel.

A river bends; it narrows and widens. It gathers branches, silt, and leaves. It drops some things and carries others all the way to the sea. Its shape changes constantly. It is never the same twice. But what remains, what truly matters, is the flow.

Spiritual awakening is less about clinging to forms and more about recognising the living current beneath them, the ceaseless, living motion. The energy that gives life to and carries every form.

God is not separate from the flow of life, but the very life within the flow, the source and sustainer of all that is.

Some Images For Religion

The Cup And The Water

Our beliefs, our practices, our religions are like a cup. Necessary. Beautiful, even. But not the water. People sometimes spend their whole lives polishing the cup, arguing about it, protecting it, and even fighting over it. They forget to drink the water.

What we search for is not separate from us. The Divine is not elsewhere, waiting at the end of a correct path of religious observance. God is nearer than breath, present in every face, every silence, every river, every prayer, and every form that briefly held the one drop of water.

The Finger And The Moon

An ancient spiritual image shows a finger pointing toward the moon. The finger matters because it directs our gaze toward something beyond itself, but the tragedy is that we 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 Raft

The Buddha offered another image: religion can be like a raft used to cross a river.

The raft matters because it carries us to the other shore, but after crossing, it makes little sense to lift it onto our shoulders and carry it on our onward journey. The raft has served its purpose.

The Menu

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 guide us in how we can experience the Divine.

Ideas, beliefs, and formulations do not transform lives.

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.

Knowing, Not Knowing About

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 the Divine 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.

Lives are not truly transformed by mere ideas alone, nor by beliefs and rigid doctrines. True transformation blossoms instead through a profound, inner change in consciousness.

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!”

They discover that God is less an object to be understood and more a reality to be experienced. Less a distant ruler and more the life within life itself. The sacred presence flowing through all things.

The more certain we become that we have captured God fully within our ideas, the smaller God tends to become. Knowledge about God is never the same as experiencing the Divine.

The Important Question

The deeper spiritual question is not: What name do I give to God? It is: Does the God I believe in make me more compassionate, more open-hearted, more inclusive and more capable of love?

In this awareness, love, compassion, justice, presence and silence become our names for God.

A God who is not a ruler somewhere above us, but rather, an ocean in which we already live, move, and have our being. Not distant. Not absent. Not belonging to some and withheld from others. Present, here and now.

Passing On Faith

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 they were all the same variety of fish and that goldfish can grow small or large, depending on the space they are given.

There is a lesson here for the formation of the young.

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.

Jesus: An Embodiment Of Love And Compassion

I was born a Christian, and I continue to find profound inspiration and guidance in the person and teachings of Jesus and in the Gospel accounts of his life.

Christianity is the tradition through which I first learned the language of the Sacred, and it remains an important part of my spiritual journey. But the circumstances of my birth determined the tradition into which I was born; they cannot determine the boundaries of the Divine. Had I been born in India, Tibet or another part of the world, I might have learned another sacred language and travelled another spiritual path. How could Universal Consciousness favour the accidents of geography, culture or birth?

It is not the 'superhuman' Jesus of doctrine and devotion that attracts or inspires me; it is the human Jesus, the prophet of transformation, portrayed in the Gospels as siding with the poor and those his religion did not welcome.

For me, Jesus is not the possession of one religion, but as one who embodied extraordinary compassion, radical inclusiveness and complete trust in Divine providence. His invitation to love God and neighbour, to forgive, to serve, to welcome the stranger and to discover the Kingdom within has grown richer, deeper and more luminous for me with the passing years.

I've come to believe that the most authentic way to respond to, or praise the God of love and compassion is to deeply embody that Divine presence within my own life and in my relationships with others.

It means striving to become kinder. More open-hearted. More just in my dealings. More profoundly compassionate. More awake to the inherent sacredness of every single person I encounter. The purpose of religion is not to make us more certain, but to make us more truly loving.

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 tills the hard ground and where the path maker breaks 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'

Tagore asks us to leave the comfortable corner of the temple, to open our eyes, and to find God among those tilling hard ground, breaking stones, and standing in the dust of ordinary human struggle.

It reminds us that worship becomes truthful when it opens our eyes to God's presence among the poor, excluded, wounded, ignored, or voiceless.

God's Wish For All

The God of love, compassion, and justice wishes fullness of life for all, not just a fortunate few. Living in an inhuman situation goes against 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.

Our response to their plight determines the authenticity of our commitment to the Gospel and our 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 they could advocate for basic human rights and have a voice. The NGO advocates for these girls with employers to ensure basic rights are in place: perhaps a day off a week, time to visit family occasionally, and fair wages and conditions.

When this girl attended her first gathering, they gave her an identification card with her name on it. Even though she could not read or write, they taught her 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?

The Only Question

The scriptures tell us 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, God will judge us 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.

The Gospel: Our Only Protocol

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, Jose Maria was right. Francis's humility and simplicity were matched only by his passion for education, justice, and our planet's future.

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.

The context was very different 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, too.

In the words of the Prophet Isaiah:

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

The Most Authentic Praise

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, something interrupted us. 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 also undertook to support the family during the potentially expensive subsequent therapies 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 a 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 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 honour God by serving the poor.

An Option

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 Latin American theologians who coined the phrase deliberately chose this verb, and it 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, embracing a 'preferential option for the poor' means a deliberate orientation in our lives and structures toward 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.

Those Made Poor

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 a voice; they want us on their side to help set right an unequal equation and enable them to rewrite their own story.

To stand with the poor invokes what martyred 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', even if we know little of what that looks like. It's about challenging social structures that can produce inequality, even when those same structures may benefit us and our security.

The Difficult Questions

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 approach the ATM, punch 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 ample unused bedding is 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?

Some questions are not problems to solve but places to live, to wrap your life around. They open a space within us and ask only that we remain there honestly, without rushing towards certainty of answer.

Shalom and God's Reign

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.

The Great Includer

Inclusion is at the heart of the Gospels, and exclusion, in its many shapes and forms, is the Gospel's greatest betrayal. Jesus excluded only 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. She was accompanied by 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!

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'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 they must have interpreted as subversion. One could say that Jesus's commitment to inclusion ultimately cost him his life.

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.

Eyes To See

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 is to find Calcutta wherever we are.

Jesus Did Not Found A Religion

Jesus cared less about preserving systems than about awakening the human heart. He viewed life through the lens of mercy, inclusion, compassion, and justice. The central figures in his stories were outsiders, foreigners, the poor, children, women, tax collectors, the sick, and those living on society's margins. The Samaritan was a neighbour. The prodigal was welcomed home. The widow was honoured. Those once thought unworthy became bearers of wisdom. Jesus prioritised not certainty or status, but the depth of our capacity to love and be loved.

No less striking is the way Jesus engaged with religion itself.

Faced with laws, rituals, and competing interpretations, he proclaimed a radically simple spirituality: love God and love your neighbour. It is shaped less by what we say about God than by how we meet one another. In his teaching, the heart of faith resided not in correct belief, but in a life made new. Perhaps this is why Jesus' vision still unsettles us.

Jesus persistently turns our attention away from power, exclusion, and religious superiority. His sharpest words are reserved not for those outside religion, but for those who use religion to exalt themselves or place heavy burdens upon others. He confronts systems of exclusion and restores dignity to those from whom it has

been taken. For Jesus, the sacred is most often encountered in vulnerability, humility, compassion, and presence.

He showed that God was not pleased with blind adherence to 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.

To declare these people 'children of God's kingdom' was a direct challenge to the religious establishment of the day. Amid extremely complex rituals of cleanliness and purity, Jesus taught that baptism in water could wash one clean.

What Jesus meant when he spoke about the Kingdom of God: not another world, but this one, whenever love becomes visible. He declared suffering, in his society seen as a sign of God's disapproval, to be a sign of God's presence.

Conversion Of Heart

Conversion does not require rejection of one's religious belief system in favour of another. It is not abandoning our tradition or changing our beliefs.

Conversion of heart 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 lepers live on an island in the middle of a 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.

St Oscar Romero and Pope Francis have also made this journey of conversion. Early in life, both men were conservative, legalistic defenders of the Church-State status quo.

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 described his 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. Legalism over compassion.

What 'knots' must we untie to free ourselves to commit more fully to the marginalised, the voiceless, and those who must be included?

The Power of Immersion

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.

Mark Nepo

Over the decades, I have witnessed the power of an immersion experience to bring about conversion of heart.

Stepping into a different world, a different way of seeing, can help us see our own situation more clearly. Immersion isn't really about where you visit. It's about

allowing your encounter with difference to transform you and help you see more clearly.

Immersion is not simply another overseas trip. It is not organised as an adventure or even a humanitarian project. Immersion is, first and foremost, an invitation to listen, to observe, and, above all, to allow oneself to be changed.

Miriam Beard wrote: "Travel is more than the seeing of sights; it is a change that goes on, deep and permanent, in one's ideas of living."

The journey is less about travelling across the world than about travelling into and beyond oneself. Every culture, every religion, and every human being offers a unique way of seeing reality. The purpose of immersion is not to compare or judge those worlds against our own, but to enter them with enough humility to allow them to question our assumptions about life. If we return home the same person who boarded the plane, then perhaps we were only a tourist.

The journey begins the moment we say yes and agree to leave the familiar behind. There was something deeply symbolic about stepping away from home. The routines that shape our lives, the assumptions we never question, the comfortable certainty of our own world; all of these we leave behind for a while. Perhaps this is why every spiritual tradition speaks of pilgrimage. Sometimes we have to change our place before we can change our perspective.

Perhaps poverty should never be something to observe from a comfortable distance. Statistics can educate the mind, but only relationships can educate the heart. We do not go to change the people we meet. We go prepared to let them change us. The greatest discovery of immersion is never another country. It is another way of seeing. And sometimes, through another's eyes, we finally begin to see ourselves.

We find ourselves wondering how the same world could produce such beauty and such inequality at the same time. Why should one child inherit security while another inherits a lifetime of uncertainty? Why should one family have opportunities beyond imagining while another struggled to meet the most basic needs every day? How do we tell the people here that we are all children of a loving God and that God wills fullness of life for them as well? The questions refused to leave.

Compassion demands that we not only care but also question; not only feel but also examine the assumptions on which our own comfortable lives have been built.

It seemed impossible to reconcile such beauty and dignity with such uncertainty. I thought of children in Australia whose lives were filled with opportunities, security, and every imaginable advantage. They have done nothing to deserve those gifts, just as these families have done nothing to deserve the circumstances of their birth. The difference lies in geography and history, in economics and politics, in forces far beyond either child's control. Yet somehow those accidents of birth would shape the possibilities of their lives.

These are questions about humanity itself. What kind of world have we created, where some lives are surrounded by abundance while others struggle for the essentials of dignity? What responsibility do I bear for a world from which I have benefited so abundantly?

Immersion cannot answer all our questions, but it can give us better ones.

Finally, the old man asked quietly, "And what have these questions you are asking done to you?"

Gabriel considered the question carefully.

"They've unsettled me."

"How so?"

"I don't think I can look at the world as I did before."

The old man smiled gently.

"Then perhaps the questions are already doing their work."

Gabriel looked at him.

"I thought wisdom gave people certainty."

"Wisdom," the old man replied softly, "rarely begins with certainty. More often, it begins when our certainties start to crumble."

"The first question is this."

He paused.

"Now that you have seen what you have seen, who will you become?"

(From 'The River Flows')

The deepest gift of an immersion experience isn't that it shows us another world. Tourism can do this. Far more importantly, it gives us new eyes to see our own world. We return home unable to pretend that suffering belongs only to strangers, because strangers have become neighbours; they now have faces. The distance between "their lives" and "my life" has begun to dissolve. Compassion begins the moment another person's life matters to me as much as my own.

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot

The real immersion begins when we come home. India, Africa, or wherever we go, has never been the destination. They have been the invitation. The real journey begins in the ordinariness of our lives, in meetings, in traffic, in paying bills, and in listening more deeply than before.

Awakening and conversion are not reserved for monasteries or mountains. They belong equally to kitchens, classrooms, hospitals and crowded railway stations. Every place is holy, not because God occasionally visits it, but because God has never left.

Immersion teaches us that no one is outside of God's embrace. There has only ever been one Life expressing itself through countless lives, one Love seeking expression through countless hearts, one Presence quietly shining through every face.

To see ourselves with greater honesty. To see others with greater compassion. To see the sacred shining quietly through ordinary life. To recognise that every person we meet carries joys and sorrows we know nothing of. To understand that every act of genuine kindness changes the world, however quietly.

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

Marcel Proust

What follows is an extract of a reflection written during the final debrief with a group before leaving India. It had the simple title:

What gifts has this immersion given me?



1. The Dignity of Every Person

1. Every person carries a dignity no circumstance can diminish.
2. The poor are among our greatest teachers.
3. Compassion begins when judgement ends.
4. Justice is love refusing to remain silent.

2. Living with an Open Heart

5. Presence is one of the purest expressions of love.
6. Listening is one of the greatest gifts we can offer another person.
7. Joy grows more from gratitude than from abundance.
8. We need far less than we imagine in order to live a rich, meaningful life.

3. Discovering Our Shared Humanity

9. Beneath all our differences, we belong to one another.
10. The illusion of separation from God and from one another lies at the heart of much human suffering.
11. The sacred is most often encountered in ordinary moments, hidden among ordinary people.
12. The world is changed one awakened heart at a time.

4. Awakening to the Divine

13. Every faith is a window into the Divine, yet no window contains the whole sky.
14. God is always greater and more expansive than our understanding of God.
15. We spend our lives searching for the One from whom we have never been separate.
16. The journey towards God is also the journey towards our truest selves.

5. Becoming Who We Truly Are

17. We are more than the roles we play. Beneath those roles lies our deepest self.
18. The purpose of life is not simply to succeed but to awaken to who we really are.
19. The questions that challenge us most are the doorway to our greatest transformation.
20. The river never struggled to become the sea. It simply discovered what it had always been.

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

Is There Something More?

For much of our lives, we are taught to become, accumulate, achieve, and define ourselves through roles, responsibilities, and recognition. There is nothing inherently wrong with this. Striving and becoming serve a purpose. They can guide us and bring structure and direction to our lives.

However, at some point in most lives, 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 striving, the roles we play, the identities we assume, lies a more authentic experience of being and living.

We can spend much of our lives collecting experiences, achievements, and identities. However, in the end, what truly matters is not what we gather, but what we become through the gathering.

For many, this longing for deeper meaning and transcendence aligns closely with a spiritual search. As someone once said, we are 'hardwired for God'. As St. Augustine prayed, "Our hearts remain restless until they rest in God."

Some New Questions

With this feeling, new questions can arise. In many cases, with much urgency:

- Who am I when I am no longer what I do?

- Have I spent all these years doing what I thought was expected of me rather than what I passionately believed in?
- Have I questioned enough the definitions of meaning, success, and happiness others and the world have handed me since childhood?
- Have I spent my life building something real or merely something impressive?
- What if life is not something to be achieved but something to be understood?
- And what if understanding begins by letting go of what I think I know?
- Have I been living my life or performing a version of it?
- Is it possible to spend your life becoming someone and yet not discover what it means to simply be?

Some Changes In Perspective

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

Kurt Vonnegut

For those who face these questions with honesty and courage, new perspectives on living can emerge.

Life becomes less about accumulation and more about release; less about certainty and more about trust; less about climbing higher and more about coming home, realising that we have never been as separate from one another, or from God, as we imagined.

Moving consciously into later life asks us to become gentler, more spacious and less defensive. Ordinary moments become cherished gifts. The ego loosens its grip. Judgement gives way to acceptance. Separation gives way to connection. Certainty gives way to open-heartedness and mystery. Loss becomes an unexpected teacher. It strips away illusion, humbles the ego and rearranges our priorities. Another truth appears: nothing essential is missing.

The journey is not upward but inward; not about acquisition but remembering; not becoming someone new but returning to who we have always been beneath fear, expectation and striving.

We learn that meaning is not waiting beyond the next accomplishment. It is here, in how we meet what is before us: another person, grief, beauty, silence and the ordinary moments we so often overlook. We learn that wisdom is not the gathering of answers, but learning to live more fully with the important questions.

The journey does not require withdrawing from the world. It asks a new question: not “How can I remain important?” but “How can I continue to serve?” Perspective, patience, compassion and the ability to accompany others through uncertainty, grief and change may be among the most valuable gifts a life can offer.

Our contribution may become quieter: encouragement, deep listening, hospitality and simple acts of care. The world needs not only achievers, but elders—people softened rather than hardened by experience, carrying wisdom instead of rigid certainty, and offering a presence no title can confer.

Remaining relevant is not about clinging to old roles, but allowing our contribution to evolve. Rivers remain rivers as their course bends. Trees continue to offer shade long after they have ceased growing taller. The invitation is not to mourn what has passed, but to discover new ways of offering the best of ourselves to the world.

A Life Truly Lived

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. Then they become 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.

Don Quixote

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 lived, embraced life's possibilities, and gave his all.

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

Zorba

Few literary figures have embodied life as fully 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.

Something in the human spirit 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.

Living With Gratitude

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. One key to knowing joy is being easily pleased!

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.

It's good to see the glass as half full rather than half empty. It's even better, perhaps, to be deeply grateful for the glass itself.

My Greatest Teacher

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 she 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 because people with leprosy lose feeling in their limbs; they need stronger protection, especially for their 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 normal in 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 watch that shop to see anyone express anything close to 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 the one
that enables us to count our blessings.

Eric Hoffer

Equanimity and Perspective

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.

We will not compare our experience to the horrors Frankl witnessed; however, the lesson is clear.

So much of our suffering doesn't spring from events themselves, but from our insistence that life conform to our deeply held expectations. We become attached to particular outcomes, and when reality gently fails to cooperate, we feel the pangs of disappointment, the flutter of anxiety, the heat of frustration, or the sting of resentment.

Worry continually tugs us away from the present moment. We become lost in what *might* happen rather than being truly attentive to what *is* happening. In doing so, we sacrifice the only moment in which life can truly be lived: the present moment.

Roberto

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.

I Don't Mind What Happens

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. They call us to embrace trust. They offer a doorway to a deeper consciousness, not rooted in fear or the need for control, but in awareness, presence, and open-hearted acceptance.

When we genuinely do not mind what happens, we are not detached from life; we are fully, vibrantly alive to it. We no longer need every circumstance to validate our hopes or protect our self-image. Instead, we become available to the richness, the beauty, and the profound mystery of each unfolding moment.

This is true surrender. Surrender isn't giving up. It is giving over, entrusting ourselves to a wisdom larger than our own, allowing life to unfold without demanding that it follow our carefully written script.

Kindred Spirits

Gratitude and equanimity are kindred spirits on this journey. Gratitude teaches us to embrace what is given. Equanimity teaches us not to cling to what is passing. Together, they free us from the exhausting task of controlling life and invite us instead to participate in it with open hearts, deep trust, and a sense of childlike wonder.

There's an old observation that in Sanskrit, the word for worry is remarkably close to the word for funeral pyre. The comparison feels apt. One consumes the dead; the other, sadly, consumes the living.

Perhaps the invitation is simple, and profoundly human: to be grateful for what is, to gently release our attachment to what might be, and to trust the unfolding mystery of life.

In gratitude, we discover joy.
In equanimity, we discover freedom.
And in both, we discover peace.

To Inhabit The Moment

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. Everyone dies, but 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.

A Child's Eyes

The deeper tragedy for most people 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 a child's eyes: 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.

We Have Limited Time

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.

I Have Lived Fully

There is a story about an Indian Maharaja who followed 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 wise, reminding him that time slips through our hands like grains of sand, and that the time to live 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 Final Questions

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 after death, the gods would ask them two questions, and their answers would determine whether they could continue their journey in the afterlife.

The first question was, “Did you bring joy?” The second was, “Did you find joy?” These goals then 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 life's crossroads. The Hero's life course is never merely random or automatic. The Hero's first choice is 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 Choice

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.

The hero is not a celebrity, a conqueror, or someone with extraordinary gifts. The hero is an ordinary person who chooses to live consciously, who dares to ask the questions many spend their lives avoiding:

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

Our grappling with these questions becomes a vehicle for our transformation. They invite us to move beyond the scripts society hands us and discover the deeper truth of who we are.

Most of us spend years wearing masks. We learn to play roles, meet expectations, and seek approval. We become skilled at being who others want us to be. Yet beneath these layers remains something essential: the person we were created to become. The great task of life is not becoming someone else; it is becoming ourselves.

Each of us carries a unique possibility within. Each person is called to sing a unique song and offer a unique gift. The tragedy is not that we fail to become famous or successful, but that we never discover our own song and spend our lives trying to sing someone else's.

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.

Slaying The Dragons

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 can become. The heroic journey does not require the absence of fear but the refusal to let fear determine the course of our lives.

Fruits Of The Journey

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 we are 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 competent and compassionate, with a conscience sensitive to the demands of the Gospel, and people of peace and justice, committed to being agents of change in a world that recognises how widespread injustice is and how pervasive the forces of oppression, selfishness, and consumerism are.

Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach

The Choice To Be Free

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 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 passively

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

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

Agency And Independence

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 others' approval or good opinion; 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.

Sometimes it can seem that two Gospels compete for attention and allegiance. Both make statements about the ultimate meaning of human life. One Gospel reveals people as replaceable, marketable commodities, whereas the other 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.'

Freedom And Choice

This conflict can distort 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 dress restricted her freedom, 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 task of education is not to condemn the world young people inhabit, but to help them interpret it. We are called to create school cultures where young people learn not only to think critically, but to discern wisely, act ethically, and choose generously.

Freedom And Responsibility

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 is not permission to do whatever we please; it is the capacity to choose the good, to stand with the vulnerable, and to use our gifts for the common good.

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

Education For Life

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 prepare young people not only to enter the future, but to shape it: as disciples, citizens, lovers, servants, agents of change and contributors to the world.

Teaching Not Training

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 Calcutta's well-heeled people, regardless of 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

The Most Important Lessons

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?

Formal education often 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.

The Important Questions

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?
- What is worth giving my life to?
- What kind of person am I becoming?
- How do I come to know peace and happiness?
- Is there meaning in suffering?
- How do I approach death?

These are sacred human questions we should build our lives around, and those who lead schools are entrusted with the extraordinary responsibility of keeping them alive.

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

It can seem that much of education is geared toward helping young people answer questions they are not asking and probably never will. This can lead many to discard the lessons they have received at school, the way they discard their school uniforms when they finish.

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

Humanisation

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 to use our limited time wisely, and the determination to leave the world a better place for having been here.

Knowledge And Wisdom

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 lost in information,
and where is the wisdom 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 keeps us restless. As someone wise once said: The land of too much information is where wonder often goes to die!

Living For Others

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 lived for others, and that purpose is most profoundly experienced through contribution to the common good. The door to happiness always opens outwards! We prepare young people not only to enter the future, but to shape it: as disciples, citizens, lovers, servants, agents of change and contributors to the world.

An anthropologist, Margaret Mead, was asked by a student what she considered 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 healed broken femur shows someone took the time to stay with the one who fell, bind the wound, carry the person to safety, and tend them through recovery. Mead said civilisation starts with helping someone else through difficulty. 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.

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

Vocation does not come from a voice “out there” calling me to become something I am not. It comes from a voice “in here” calling me to be the person I was born to be, to fulfil the original selfhood God gave me at birth.

Parker Palmer

The Greatest Privilege

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.

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.

Our Influence

We live in an age of influencers. Young people follow them on social media, often absorbing their attitudes, values and ways of seeing the world.

As educators, we should never underestimate the influence we carry simply through the way we live our lives and don't live our lives. Perhaps the most powerful influencers in a young person's life are not always found on a screen, but standing in front of them each day.

Your vocation is to be an influencer!

Not all educators and parents will use the same religious language, belong to the same worshipping communities, or understand faith in the same way. We do not all need to teach Religious Education to share in the spiritual formation of the young. Yet every adult in a school community teaches something about life: by what we notice, what we value, how we treat people, and how we respond to suffering, difference and hope.

The most powerful curriculum in any school is the culture adults create. Students learn from what we reward, what we ignore, how we speak about those who are absent, how we respond to failure, how we treat those with little power, and how we hold together excellence and compassion.

We are all custodians of this hidden curriculum. We are always teaching, even when no lesson is being delivered.

Schools are called to be places where young people hear, not only in words but in daily experience, that their lives matter, that they are loved, that they have gifts to offer, and that the world is better when those gifts serve others.

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 way to 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.

Our Lives Are Our Message

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 three ways an individual could change the world. The first was by example. The second was by example. The third was by example.

Example is not the main thing in influencing others. It is the only thing!

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. No greater legacy exists than a life well lived.

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

Rumi

Vocation

Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you. Before you tell your life what truths and values you have decided to live up to, let your life tell you what truths you embody, what values you represent.

Parker Palmer

Our vocation is not about building a life that impresses others, but about listening closely to the life God is already stirring within us.

The term 'vocation' comes from the Latin word voice. Perhaps our deepest calling is not something we choose. It is something we hear. Beneath others' expectations

and the ambitions that we create for ourselves, a calling voice invites us to become who we most deeply are.

We are helping young people remember who they truly are, not simply what they can achieve or merely the career they might one day pursue, but the dignity that already belongs to them, the goodness already alive within them, and the light that no examination can measure and no failure can extinguish. Perhaps that is our deepest vocation: to recognise that light, to protect and nurture it, and, whenever possible, to help it recognise itself.

Saints And Heroes

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 parents and educators are called to be heroes, shining the light of authentic, well-lived lives for emerging generations.

Not Perfect...Truly Authentic

I love this story from the Talmud, the Jewish scriptures:

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

There is a crack in everything; that's how the light gets in.

Leonard Cohen

None of us is perfect.

If we wait for perfection before embarking on a leadership journey, we will never contribute. 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!

Our Favourite Teachers

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 you remember most fondly is someone
who, in some way, went out of their way to engage with you on 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.

In the end, though, we all learn that good teaching cannot be reduced to a series of techniques; it comes from educators' love and integrity. 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 esteemed highly enough. We look back with appreciation on brilliant teachers, but with gratitude for those who touched our humanity. Warmth is the vital element for the growing plant and for the child's soul.

Two Guitars

Musicians know that when two perfectly tuned guitars sit side by side, plucking a string on one makes the corresponding string on the other resonate.

Human beings are like this too.

When one heart becomes deeply attuned to love, compassion and truth, something within another begins to resonate. We recognise a frequency that was already there, waiting to be awakened.

When we speak with the head, the head hears. But when we speak with the heart, the heart hears.

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 Gift Of Belief

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

During a visit to India, I once noticed a young teacher kneeling beside a boy struggling to write. She never corrected him, nor did she reach for the pencil herself. She simply stayed beside him, encouraging each hesitant attempt until, at last, the boy looked up and smiled.

The boy didn't smile because he had mastered the exercise, but because he realised someone believed he could. This was a sacred moment. No cathedral could have contained more grace than this small classroom in this moment. Education, at its heart, has always been an act of hope made visible. As Simone Weil once said: 'Attention is the rarest and purest form of generosity.'

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 all the time. Teddy could be unpleasant. It got to the point where Mrs Thompson took delight in marking his papers with a broad red pen, 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 wrote that he had finished third in his class and that she was still the best teacher he had ever had.

Four years later, 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 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 said she was still the best and favourite teacher he'd 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, 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 Stodarts' 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.

The Heart Of Vocation

We become the message by the way we live it. And we help shape the future by becoming, here and now, the kind of people we hope the young will one day become.

- To become loving, not merely to speak of love;
- To practise compassion, not merely to teach about it;
- To stand with those who need justice, not merely to praise it;

- To let every encounter reveal our belief in the dignity of every person.

For educators, parents and all adults entrusted with the formation of the young, this is the heart of vocation.

Let's take inspiration from the words of George Bernard Shaw:

This is the true joy in life... being used for a purpose you recognise as mighty.

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 splendid torch I hold for the moment, and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations.

May every choice you make, every moment you embrace, become a brushstroke on the canvas of a life well lived. Dare to create with vibrant hues; dare to leave 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.

Burn brightly.

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.

A spark of God exists in each of us, and we are not separate from God or from each other.

As the leaf emerges from the tree and expresses the life of the tree, so do we emerge from God and express God's love and compassion in the world. We are called to make God visible to the world and embody Divine love, kindness, and compassion.

A story tells of 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 others' suffering, God's own heart beats within us. When we long to see others joyful, God sees through our eyes. 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. No higher teaching exists 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.

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. 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, make meaning, contribute, and live reflectively and compassionately.

The ancient Greek root of the word "hero" means "the one who can choose." A true hero authors 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. Through service to others, 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.

Someone wise once wrote that the two most important days of our lives are the day we were born, and the day we worked out why.

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. The quality of your heart, not the size of your résumé, 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 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. Even better, 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 risk 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 judgment. 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 we're asked 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 you recognise as mighty.

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 splendid torch I hold 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.

Part 5

SOME THOUGHTS FOR LEADERS

Titles And Influence

Most leaders hold a title. We have worked hard to earn them, and there is nothing wrong with having one. The problem arises when we rely on titles to assert our leadership, authority, and influence.

Leadership cannot be conferred by appointment, accolades, or titles. Respect, influence, and authority cannot simply be claimed or announced; they must be demonstrated and earned through consistent actions and behaviours.

Anyone, regardless of their official role or title, can lead by example through their actions, integrity, values, and how they treat others. Its power lies in influence: one life touching another and helping light the way for many. People recognise leadership and respect it because of a leader's character, vision, and actions.

At best, a title may buy you a little time to show who you really are.

In her inimitable way, Margaret Thatcher once reminded us of this when she said, 'Being a leader is like being a lady! If you need to tell someone that you are one, you probably aren't.'

Leadership begins in the leader's heart and soul. True leaders begin not with a quest for recognition, but with a commitment to something greater than themselves, and a deep desire to make a meaningful difference.

A Vision

A leader's first task is to help us imagine the kind of world we are trying to leave behind.

In education, through our words and witness, we make bold claims about the future: about justice, about how we should relate to one another, and about the true meaning of freedom, purpose and belonging. The leader will speak for the voiceless and stand with the excluded.

Leaders ask questions like: Who is being excluded? Who is being unheard? Who is carrying a burden alone? Who is being denied the chance to flourish?

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

Eleanor Roosevelt

Leadership becomes transformative when people are inspired to reach higher, dream bigger, and become more than they thought possible. At its heart, leadership inspires, empowers and uplifts others through authenticity, humility, and commitment to a cause greater than oneself.

The leader ensures that everyone they serve knows their contribution, however humble, is vital to achieving the community's noblest goals.

A leader is clear about what they stand for, and it must align with the highest vision for our communities. As American Priest Theodore Hesburgh reminded us, the very essence of leadership is having a vision. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet!

Off The Wall

Leadership begins when our values move beyond what we say or write and become visible in ordinary moments: how we make decisions, speak to people, treat the vulnerable, resolve conflict, use power, and respond when no one is applauding.

The catchphrase for the clothing and footwear brand Vans is 'Off the Wall'. We might espouse the 'Vans' approach to leadership.

A leader challenges their community to take statements of values, priorities, and principles off the walls of our offices and classrooms and live them in the life and fabric of our community. The real question is whether those words have a pulse in our lives.

Inspiration

Leadership is fundamentally about inspiration.

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

The quality of your leadership will be measured by your willingness and capacity to inspire, engage, and enlist others in a mission sparked by God's desire to offer the fullness of life to all humanity.

We are not speaking here only about systems, structures, policies or strategic plans. These things matter. They give shape to our work and help us steward the resources entrusted to us. But leadership begins somewhere deeper.

Martin Luther King Jr. began his iconic address at the Lincoln Memorial with the words: 'I have a dream!' Notice that he didn't say, 'I have a strategic plan!'

While strategic plans are important, true leaders must be able to dream and inspire others to dream alongside them.

We may sometimes be blessed with a podium and words to inspire, but more often, we work through humble witness and selfless example. The irony and truth are that we inspire more through our authenticity and humility than through dazzling skills or eloquence.

Service

Before leadership is ever privilege, it is service. We are not called to stand above people, but beside them. We are not called to make ourselves the centre, but to create space where others can discover their voice, their dignity and their gifts. Service is not weakness, softness or the absence of standards. Service is strength enlisted toward the flourishing of others.

As leaders, we are accountable. Accountable for the culture we permit, the silences we tolerate, the exclusions we fail to challenge, and the young lives shaped by the daily climate of our schools.

Leadership is never neutral. It either humanises or diminishes; it either widens the circle or narrows it; it either reveals something of the Reign of God or obscures it.

It sets people free from fear, passivity, narrowness and the small stories that tell them they are not enough. It creates the conditions in which students and staff can claim their voice, name their world, ask better questions, and grow into the fullness of their humanity.

Hope

To offer hope is one of leadership's great responsibilities. Hope is not shallow optimism or the denial of difficulty. Hope is the conviction that a better future is possible, and the courageous decision to help bring it into being. In a school, hope is not optional. It is part of our moral purpose.

True leaders face reality without surrendering to despair; name the storm while still pointing to the horizon; and let their courage become courage for others.

Presence, Humility And Compassion

We are called to lead with presence, serve with humility, act with compassion, awaken hope, seek justice, and inspire communion.

To live in such a way that others discover more deeply who they are called to become.

The deepest measure of leadership is not how much we control, how much we achieve, or how loudly we are applauded.

The deepest measure is whether life is enlarged through our presence.

- Are people freer because we have led them?
- Are they more hopeful?
- More courageous?
- More compassionate?
- More committed to justice?
- More aware of their own dignity and the dignity of others?

In the end, the task of leadership is not merely to make good schools better. It is to help make human beings more fully alive. It is to keep alive the sacred possibility that education can liberate, heal, awaken and transform.

May those who encounter our leadership discover not simply that we were strong, capable or successful, but that through us they came to believe more deeply in the sacred worth of their own lives, and in the sacred responsibility we all share for one another.

And may our leadership be measured not only by what we build, organise or achieve, but by the lives liberated, the dignity defended, the hope rekindled, and the responsibility awakened in those we are privileged to serve.

