Nurturing, Networking and Community

Great Southern Grammar 18.7.16
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*Your Life Is Not About You: The truth that deep education leads us to connections and responsibility.*

We were walking back to our hotel along the terrible footpaths and dangerous streets of Phnom Penh after a nice dinner at the end of a long day. I was at the front of our party of 24 Year 11 and 12 students and eight staff from Christ Church Grammar School and Saint Mary’s Anglican Girls School. Other staff were dispersed throughout the group. My antenna was up for crazier than normal drivers, potholes and mangy dogs. Two of the girls were walking beside me, I was distracted and we were keeping it ‘safe’ with some shallow banter until one of them chucked a grenade from out of the corner of her mouth saying, “I wish I had something to believe in like you. I wish I had something to believe in like you.”

You see the context was that we had been in Cambodia for a week which had included;

- Visiting the Toul Sleng or S-21 prison and Choeung Ek Killing Fields,
- Working daily with the Cambodian Children’s Fund who offer educational enrichment to children and families who live on or near Stung Meanchey, the rubbish dump,
- Hearing the stories of some of the most horribly abandoned and abused children from Scott Neeson, the CCF’s Aussie founder and CEO,
- Adjusting to the heat, dirt, smells, overcrowding, lack of services, inevitable tummy bugs and anarchic roads, and
- Processing all of this in the groups’ nightly prayerful, contemplative, and mindful debrief and discussion sessions...

One of this 16-year-old’s awakenings among many others was a growing awareness of how shallow the roots of her beliefs were. She was able to articulate something profound that many people in our schools and society cannot. And so we get the resurgence of the ‘far right’ and ‘loony left’ which simply means that a lot of people are not taking responsibility for their pain and confusion and thus finding ways to scapegoat and blame others. This leads to the breakdown of connections and the ties that bind us in the best ways.

I will return to the richness of service learning experiences later but for now I would like to take you on a bit of a journey around the themes of connected-ness, community, compassion. Under the banner of this conference; ‘Great Southern Grammar Connects; the dialogue we need to have about how we connect, engage and plan in the context of our global community,’ I’d like to share some of my experiences and observations.

In a recent article in Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* newspaper, Jonathon Sachs the former chief rabbi of Great Britain, responded to the Brexit vote with a piece titled; *We Need Morality to Beat this Hurricane of Anger.* And while I share some excerpts, I invite you to think of your own context; in terms of our recent election, this school, your communities in the Southwest, and yours and your children’s lives. It doesn’t take much scratching below the surface to begin to understand why and how we have become so disconnected.

Sachs writes; “the hurricane blowing through Britain is not unique. In one form or another it is hitting every western democracy. There is a widespread feeling that politicians have been failing us. The real question is; what kind of leadership do we need to steer us through the storm? What we are witnessing is the politics of anger – at unemployment, immigration, financial institutions and the perceived impotence of governments to control the
spread of extremism and terror. This has led to the emergence of the Far Right who seek a return to some kind of golden age that never was, and the Far Left in pursuit of a utopia that never will be. They are both the enemies of freedom. Anti-political politicians have arisen (look at the return of our own Pauline Hanson) who raise expectations that cannot be met. When reality bites, the anger will become deeper and darker.”

What a biting critique and, in my opinion, full of a great deal of truth and wisdom. And wasn’t it interesting that in our recent Federal campaign, so-called ‘positive politics’ didn’t seem to gain any traction. All sides surged when they engaged in the politics of fear, misinformation and scapegoating. Bring this down to the school, community and family level and see if there aren’t a few grains of truth. Of course we try to be positive, we use words in our strategic plans like ‘effective educational communities,’ ‘the highest levels of educational achievement for each child,’ and ‘developing an educational environment that is authentically Christian.’ Be careful what you wish for, by the way, as authentic Christianity always leads to the cross before we see the light and hope of resurrection.

But if we’re honest, our daily lives can be a grind. Many people down here are looking for jobs. Tensions abound in every workplace, classroom and home. This school was founded in 1996 to keep families together and it needed to acknowledge that is stood on important Noongar land at the meeting of the Kalgan and the King – land that will never be given back. How wonderful that the local elder Aiden Eades offered the healing words, “never forget that this is Noongar land but you are welcome to use it, especially for the use of something like education.”

And as an aside, I never cease to be amazed and humbled by the capacity Indigenous Australians have for connection and forgiveness. Just last week I was sitting in the Lord Mayor’s office with Professor Simon Forrest negotiating a project to restore the ‘white bench’ that represented a meeting place just outside Perth’s central railway station for local Aboriginal people. What I didn’t know until Simon mentioned it at the meeting was that was also the place that they had to return to by 5.30pm until the 1950’s as Perth had a curfew area for Indigenous people. His parents ran the risk of getting arrested and locked up for the night if they were ‘caught’ in the CBD after 6pm during their courting years.

After the meeting we parted outside my office in the Old Deanery beside St George’s Cathedral which used to be the site of the old Perth gaol. While leaning on the wall and spending time in unhurried fellowship, as is the Indigenous way without words for long periods, we reflected upon the horrors that had been meted out there. Yagan’s father Midgegooroo was shot without trial and hung from a tree as an example in 1931 and there was a whipping post on the comer. It was also the location Governor Stirling set out from to raise his posse and commit the 1834 Pinjarra massacre. In December 2014, as part of the building of the new diocesan Church House behind us (the site of the old Playhouse Theatre if you remember it), an Aboriginal man’s skull from the 19th Century was unearthed. It was not Midgeroogoo’s but that of another victim of colonial justice. And it is now the location where 20-30 people a day come for a food handout, the vast majority being Indigenous. It takes many generations to recover from systematic trauma and dispossession.

After a long silence, Simon quietly said; “It would be good to have an act of reconciliation here and maybe a memorial, a point of reference of some kind.” And I agreed, and we shook hands, and we went on our way. There was no anger, no call for retribution, no call for financial reparation. Just a resigned and rather gentle suggestion – a reaction I have seen time and time again.

But back to Rabbi Sachs’s reflections. Here I think they hit a chord and have a powerful message for us in the context of this conference. He writes; “for the past half century we have been living through one of the great unstated social experiments of all time. We have tried to construct a world without identity and morality. Instead we left it to two systems to deal with the problems of our collective life; the market economy and the liberal democratic state. Morality has been outsourced to the market which reduces it to a set of choices in which right and wrong have no meaning beyond the satisfaction or frustration of desire.”

Can you hear the resonance for our kids now, our teenagers struggling to become themselves so that they can lead good lives? Sachs continues; “it’s increasingly hard to understand why there might be things we want and can afford to do but that we shouldn’t because they are unethical, they are wrong, they are dishonourable,
disloyal or demeaning. If the elites live by the code – it’s ok if I can get away with it…. rather than I am here to serve and to serve with honour, civilization decays.”

“Meanwhile,” he says, “the liberal democratic state abolished national identity in favour of multiculturalism, turning society from a home into a hotel.” Think of this school now; “in a hotel you pay the price, get a room, and are free to do what you like as long as you don’t disturb the other guests. A home generates identity, loyalty and a sense of belonging.” I’m sure that GSG is a home for many, the challenge is to look out for the ones for whom it is just a hotel. And they won’t only be the disenfranchised ones who can’t wait to get out of here, the boy that doesn’t fit in, the girl that is so down on herself…they may also be those with an unhealthy sense of privilege or entitlement, the ‘pretend prefect’ or the driven one who doesn’t stop for a moment to reflect upon what being a contributing community member means.

Sachs concludes his confronting article; “the market economy and liberal democratic state are two of the West’s greatest achievements, but without a strong sense of identity and morality, they will fail. We must recover the central insight of our great religious and civic traditions, that society is woven out of shared ideals. Confident in our identity, we can welcome all comers, and strong in our moral sense, we can build organisations that strengthen communities.”

Friends, that’s what these few days are about. Being confident enough in our identity to welcome EVERYONE and being strong enough in our moral sense to build a school that connects to a suburb, that enriches a city, and that sends out well educated and compassionate envos to make the world a better place.

So how do we do that and how do we, going back to my opening story, work in a creative tension with families, society, the internet and ubiquitous social media and the young people themselves to create identity and a strong moral compass? Let me make five suggestions. Do with them what you will and they are available on a handout so you don’t have to take notes unless that keeps you awake. For the really astute among you, you may notice that they form an acronym which represents my theme: SERVE

1. The ‘S’ stands for self-awareness. In his famous Apology, Plato quoted Socrates at his trial; “the unexamined life is not worth living.” Polonius in act 1 of Hamlet gives a last piece of advice to his son Laertes; “This above all; to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man.” Jesus, being quizzed by a clever lawyer about the most important of the 613 commandments for a strict Jew, replied; “love God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.” The positive psychology movement sweeping the Australian education system at the moment, based upon the work of Martin Seligman and his notion of creating environments where children flourish – talks about the need for mindfulness. Here, in the tradition of every ancient spirituality, we invite the young to stop, take time out, get in touch with nature, switch off technology, use all five senses, fall into their breathing and become fully present in the moment. Let’s have a moment now. Just to break things up a bit. Get comfortable, close your eyes, get in touch with your breathing, what senses have become more alive since closing your eyes? How are you feeling? Tired, excited, bored, worried? What is one thing you are grateful for in your life right now… Can you see that THE most important thing we can do for the kids in our care is to deepen their sense of self. As important as the curriculum may be, the dynamic between teacher and student is the most important contributor to a good education. And to lead our students more deeply into their sense of who they are, where they stand in the world and what they stand for, I believe that we as educators need to be committed to our own inner journey.

Parker J Palmer in his excellent book that I think all teachers should have on their shelves, The Courage to Teach; Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher’s Life, writes in his introduction; “the question most commonly asked in teacher formation is *What shall I teach?” My subject area and curriculum requirements. When the conversation goes a bit deeper we ask “*How shall I teach – what methods and techniques shall I use?” Occasionally when it goes deeper still, we ask the *why* question, “To what purpose and for what ends do I teach?” But seldom, if ever, do we ask the *who* question; “Who is the self that teaches?” how does the quality of my selfhood form or deform the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues and the world? How is my selfhood and that of my students changed during the teaching dynamic and is it changed for the good?”
If you’re not asking the ‘who?’ question, if you’re not spending time in self and directed reflection (we priests for example are required to have a supervisor AND a spiritual director), then how can you direct the young people in your care into a deeper and deeper sense of self awareness, my first point. And by the way, the tendency is to have less supervision the longer you’re in the job or the higher up the organisation you go. I think that is crazy, and every professional should have a similarly professional relationship with a mentor, counsellor, guide, spiritual director...whatever, and it is MOST important for the leaders of organisations.

Spending time getting to know our students, being honest with them about ourselves (within the bounds of appropriateness), helping them develop emotional literacy and intelligence, creating reflective time and spaces, and encouraging them to see where they stand in the world is the keys to our role as educators and the real reason that teaching is such an amazing and noble profession. And so my first suggested point of connection and community is with the self.

2. The first ‘E’ stands for empathy. The sibling of self-awareness is empathy. Once a person begins to understand themselves, they can begin to understand their place in the class, the school, their family, society and the world. According to the legendary American educator Jane Elliot of ‘blue eyes – brown eyes’ fame (where in response to the assassination of Martin Luther-King Jnr in 1968 she segregated her Year 3 class on the basis of their eye colour and she’s been doing it with adults around the world ever since); racism, bigotry, hatred and intolerance have no gene, they are learned and ingrained by ignorance and they can be unlearned by education and empathy.

I can remember the debrief one balmy night in the very remote Burringurrah Aboriginal community in the Gascoyne, where a boy admitted being scared when three young bearded and tattooed men came into the swimming pool area where we were running lessons for the local kids. When I explained that they were there to play with their babies and partners, I asked why he had felt afraid. He answered, “Because all I see on the TV and in the papers back home is bad stuff about men who look like that.” He had been taught to be afraid by the biased and ignorant media reporting that we are exposed to day and day out.

One of the lovely things about my present role is the opportunities it grants for interfaith dialogue and experiences. Last year in response to the Paris terrorist attacks on Fri 13th Nov (and let me acknowledge the awful events in Nice this week), my Muslim friends organised a prayer vigil in the cathedral for the victims of terror and to condemn it unequivocally. It was attended by Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, B’Hais, Janes and atheists but by far the largest group in attendance were Muslims. The media weren’t interested.

On Christmas Eve, the Iranian community rang and explained to me that every 15 years the prophet Muhammad’s birthday which is on a lunar cycle (did you know that) coincided with the prophet Jesus’s (who is mentioned 25 times in the Q’ran. Could they please come and join us for worship at our 8am Holy Communion and provide breakfast for the congregation afterwards? They did, a hundred people stayed and their leader gave a lovely talk about our common humanity and our faith’s mutual desire for peace, compassion, justice and mercy. Empathy personified and again the media were not interested.

Friends, we must model and teach and honour empathy in our children. From sharing toys to sharing the earth’s resources, this is our only future. In a Christian school they must come to understand that a) they are as good as everyone else and no better, and b) there is nothing they can do to make God love them more and there is nothing they can do to make God love them less. The radical gift of Christianity is the notion that every single person is of equal worth in the eyes of the creator and thus in the eyes of the created...who are made in his/her image, and his/her imagination. When the gospels suggest Jesus had compassion for the crowds who seemed like sheep without a shepherd, the Greek verb they use is splagnizimo, literally meaning that his guts churned and he was moved to the core of his very being to do something about their suffering.

My youngest daughter is in her fourth year of teaching in Marble Bar and it was a Year 10 teacher with splagnizimo who inspired her desire to work with Indigenous children in remote communities. One teacher who wept at the pain she was feeling for the innocent who suffer – had a huge impact on those who witnessed her passion.
If we can teach our kids to imagine fair classroom, a fair Albany, a fair WA, a fair Australia, and a fair planet earth through story, creativity, information and experience...then we are building the ties and bridges that hold us together. Empathy – my second point of connection with those around us.

3. The 'R' in my SERVE acronym stands for reality. One of my spiritual teachers, Richard Rohr, the Director of the Centre for Contemplation and Action in Albuquerque in the US, writes in his book *Falling Upwards: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life*; “we become adults not on the day we turn 18 or 21 but on the day we truly understand that ‘my life is not about me, I am not in control and I am going to die.’” Now as harsh as that sounds, we know it to be true because we have been around for a while and we have learned through life’s bitter-sweet experiences that it has always been true. Our life is NOT about us, we are not in control of the truly big things (eg; our birth, death, looks, IQ, aspects of our health, who we fall in love with etc) and we are marked for death. We may rail against them, we may fight for pseudo control like euthanasia, but we are only on this spinning globe for the blink of an eye.

In my opinion, one of the most unhelpful clichés that has developed in recent times (and this is NOT part of the positive psychology movement by the way), is to say to anyone over the age of about 10 “you can be anything you want to be.” Yes – if you learn to love yourself, and if you dedicate yourself to a dream, and if you listen and learn and grow, you stand a very good chance of having many excellent options at the end of your time in school. PLEASE say that. But every teenager is coming to understand that society has rules and life has dealt them a hand which may or may not be a favourable as the kid next to them.

A report in the latest *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* has found that between 1996 and 2012, nearly 20% of Aboriginal births in WA went unregistered. That means that nearly 5000 children in this state started life with no identity. The 1967 referendum was meant to make the first Australians human (they were officially classified as fauna up until then) and visible but as we sit here today thousands of Aboriginal children have fallen through the cracks before their lives even got going. They will not be teachers, or doctors, or truck drivers or in many, many cases healthy human beings.

But even in our privileged schools there is a huge range of advantage, disadvantage, motivation, self worth and vision. I think it is our job as educators to teach two simple realities; a) you are of infinite worth, a beloved child of God with all the opportunities that your gifts and graces make possible, and b) you are a tiny part of an awesome universe, a member of the family of seven billion human beings, and a small part of a great project called history, the beginning and end of which we are not privy to but which we can affect for good or bad depending upon our choices. So my third point of connection is the reality of our common humanity, our reliance upon the whole world.

4. The 'V' stands for volunteerism, which is not a great word but I’ve run out of ‘s’s and I want to talk about service learning. I once heard Professor Andrew Harvey, the youngest ever full professor at Oxford, talk about leaving academia behind at the age of 26 to go and live on an ashram in India to unlearn and ‘undo’ his mind and obsession with things. When asked in question time which charity or cause we should give to or get involved with, he paused for a long time and quietly responded; the one that keeps you awake at night.

I believe that we need to offer our students the opportunity to connect with serving others locally, nationally and internationally. It needs to extend beyond fundraisers and sausage sizzles and where possible interface with those less fortunate than themselves. In my time as the Director of Service Learning and Leadership at Christchurch Grammar recently, I developed the Service In Action programme. Based upon the four pillars of;
1. Educational enrichment, 2. Cultural awareness, 3. Leadership development and 4. Learning through service, it included a trip to an orphanage in Fiji for Year 7 and 8's, a Year 9 and 10 journey to the Yipirinya Indigenous school in Alice Springs, four remote Indigenous community immersion experiences in Year 11, and the Year 11 and 12 trip to Cambodia. Where possible, they were in partnership with girls' schools which makes a huge difference to group dynamics and the depth of the debrief sessions each evening.

In every single case the main revelations were;
- how fortunate and privileged my life is
how often I take my educational opportunities for granted

how on earth can these kids who have so little be so happy

poverty is NEVER the fault of the poor people

I CAN make a difference, and

In my privileged position of seeing many of these young people throughout their life journey (one of the real blessings of being a priest), I see them wrestle with the question; how can I build the meaningful service of others into the rest of my life?

You have had some outstanding students at this school who I have met at prefect leadership camps and graduations and I know that they have been through the same process. It is a beautiful thing to see young adults like Akram Azimi, a former Afghan refugee, and Young Australian of the Year in 2013, move from remote Indigenous communities mentoring young people about education to risking his life raising $500 million with other young change agents and taking polio vaccinations into remote regions of Pakistan. From despised Arab-looking kid when he arrived at Warwick SHS in 2002 to Dux and peer elected Captain of School five years later, Akram’s is a remarkable story. He just completed three degrees with honours at UWA, winning all the academic awards along the way in Biological Sciences, Law and Anthropology. Like every single refugee I have ever met in this country, he is grateful, he is a pillar of society and he is making Australia a better place.

So I encourage you to keep building service learning into every subject and every level of the curriculum, not to have it standing off to the side for a select group of volunteers. You have the huge advantage of a moral and values system based on the person and work of the most influential life of all time – Jesus of Nazareth. Unless young people know WHY they are called to serve others they will never reap the physical, psychological, social and spiritual benefits of doing so.

And finally to the ‘E’ in my acronym SERVE. It stands for eternity. Remember it in lights on the Sydney Harbour Bridge during the 200 Olympics? Written in chalk all over Sydney between the 1930’s and 60’s by Arthur Stace a broken man whose life was changed upon conversion to Christianity, it was meant to remind people of God’s eternal values and love.

In this school you are not just concerned with the temporal, with what is humanly possible, with only what see in this world. It is a challenge as Christianity is always being watered down by the ‘market’ and when schools give ground in religious areas they rarely if ever get it back. As Rabbi Sachs wrote, we must not outsource our morality to the market or pour identity to that which is fashionable. Private schools always walk a tightrope between keeping fees affordable and offering a differentiated education that has a vision in your case to be, and I quote; the premier provider of education in the great southern region, offering quality education in a Christian environment.

Wow. That’s wonderful and you are well on your way. But one of the critical ways in which I believe you are called to differentiate is by still teaching and modelling values like the Beatitudes. Jesus said blessed and deeply satisfied will be;

- the poor in spirit
- the meek and humble
- those who thirst for righteousness
- those who mourn
- those who persecuted for doing right, and
- those who strive for peace

He didn’t say anything in these utterly counter cultural values about being wealthy and owning lots of things or even being successful. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” another lawyer asked him one day; back came the same reply; “love god with every fibre of your being and your neighbour as yourself.” And those three are inseparable. We must love self enough to love our neighbour and to understand that there is a love like God’s.

And that is a school like Great Southern Grammar’s great work along with the families who send their children
to you. Teaching and offering eternal stories, rituals, prayers and stories while offering opportunities to put them into practice. My young friend in Cambodia, who I had up on stage at the convention centre in Melbourne a few weeks ago sharing a presentation with me on deep communication in front of 500 educators, articulated the call of her generation and many people in our society – *I wish I had something to believe in*. And so my fifth suggested point of connection that we can and should offer our students in a Christian-based school is to God and God's eternal values.

I'll leave you with the same story I leave the students with on the rooftop in Cambodia. The story of Alexander Papaderos from Robert Fulghum's book, *I Learned Everything I Needed to Know when I was in Kindergarten*. "Are There Any Questions?" Once, and only once, I asked that question and got a serious answer. One that is with me still.

Near the village of Gonia on a rocky bay of the island of Crete, sits a Greek Orthodox monastery. Alongside it, on land donated by the monastery, is an institute dedicated to human understanding and peace, and especially to rapprochement between Germans and Cretans. An improbable task, given the bitter residue of wartime. This site is important, because it overlooks the small airstrip at Maleme where Nazi paratroopers invaded Crete and were attacked by peasants wielding kitchen knives and hay scythes. The retribution was terrible. The populations of whole villages were lined up and shot for assaulting Hitler's finest troops.

Against this heavy curtain of history, in this place where the stone of hatred is hard and thick, the existence of an institute devoted to healing the wounds of war is a fragile paradox. How has it come to be here? The answer is a man; Alexander Papaderos. A doctor of philosophy, teacher, politician, resident of Athens but a son of this soil. At war's end he came to believe that the Germans and the Cretans had much to give one another - much to learn from one another. If they could forgive each other and construct a creative relationship, then any people could.

Papaderos succeeded. The institute became a reality, a conference ground on the site of horror, and it was in fact a source of productive interaction between the two countries. By the time I came to the institute for a summer session, Alexander Papaderos had become a living legend. One look at him and you saw his strength and intensity. At the last session on the last morning of a two-week seminar on Greek culture, led by experts in their fields, Papaderos rose from his chair at the back of the room walked to the front, where he stood in the bright Greek sunlight of an open window and looked out. He turned. And made the ritual gesture: "Are there any questions?"

Quiet quilted the room. These two weeks had generated enough questions for a lifetime, but for now there was only silence. "Dr. Papaderos, what is the meaning of life?" I asked. The usual laughter followed, and people stirred to go. Papaderos held up his hand and stilled the room and looked at me for a long time, asking with his eyes if I was serious and seeing from my eyes that I was. "I will answer your question."

Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter. And what he said went like this:

"When I was a small child, during the war, we were very poor and we lived in a remote village. One day, on the road, I found the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine -- in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of light. But light -- truth, understanding, knowledge -- is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.
I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world -- into the black places in the hearts of men -- and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life.”

And then he took his small mirror and, holding it carefully, caught the bright rays of daylight streaming through the window and reflected them onto my face and onto my hands folded on the desk. Much of what I experienced in the way of information about Greek culture and history that summer is gone from memory. But in the wallet of my mind I carry a small round mirror still.