The Isaac Armitage Lecture 2019

Radical Autonomy or Radical Dependence?

What is the purpose of schooling? I suggest that at its noblest level of conception it is and will continue to be a venture by society that seeks to teach the young what it means to flourish as a human being. This may be phrased as the ability to discern and pursue the good life, where good of course is not primarily a concept of pleasure but of moral wellbeing. I would add that for a Christian school such a purpose therefore implies the pursuit of the beautiful, true and good in the context of faith in Christ and lives lived for Him. We see this primarily in our promotion of a life of faith. However, because each of us serves a community where not all will share that faith, what can we impart as an outworking of our Christian perception of God's General Providence that will enrich the lives of our people?

Currently, a much debated subject and term is "individualism". A key tenet of Christian faith is that the individual matters. Larry Siedentop[1] is not alone in his powerfully convincing argument that the concept of the individual as we understand it today in the West is a Christian invention and development. The faith teaches that each is accountable for his or her actions, and that each is known to and precious to God, and comes into relationship with him as an individual. And nothing I say tonight should be interpreted as saying that individuals and their needs and interests are unimportant.

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[1] Siedentop, L, *Inventing the Individual*, Penguin London 2014

A second tenet is that we are made for relationship. It is not good that Adam is alone. There is a sense in the Genesis narrative that the making of a partner for Adam is an added blessing to the relationship that he already enjoys with God. This is a significant perspective for our understanding of what it means to be human. There is a huge body of research, literature and history which identifies and expounds our need to be in relationship, deep relationship, with others and with our world.

The consequent biblical view of a people called into communion with God and each other is foundational to God's salvation action: Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the new. *I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.* (Exodus 6:7) So we come into relationship with God as part of a group as well as an individual. I contend that from our human standpoint our individual accountability can only make sense in the context of relationships, whatever our personal faith position.

Individual accountability to others makes most sense when there is an agreement between people about what is good, what is the proper way to act. In his work, *After Virtue*,[2] Alasdair McIntyre identified the challenge we have faced in the past 250-300 years as we have moved from a Thomist/Aristotelian world in which virtue both internal and external to ourselves with its accompanying teleology has been replaced by a broad utilitarian matrix in which the notion of a teleology is not present. By

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[2] McIntyre, A, *After Virtue*, 3rd Edition Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, Indiana 2016

teleology I mean the sense of a goal towards which an action or a practice is oriented and moves, from the Greek *telos*.

When I use the word practice, I mean it in the sense of McIntyre's use:

> *Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions to the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended (MacIntyre 1985, 187).*

Marian Fitzmaurice explains:

> *"So, what counts as a practice? The planting of crops is not a practice, but farming is, as are the enquiries of physics, chemistry, biology and the work of the historian, the musician and the painter. A practice involves standards of excellence and to enter into a practice is to accept these standards and to judge one's own performance against them. The goods internal to a practice can only be had by involvement in that practice unlike external goods such as money, status and prestige, which can be achieved in many ways. Also, such*

goods can only be specified in relation to that practice and they can only be identified and recognised by participating in the practice. "[3]

For McIntyre the key to a moral action is its goal in the context of a practice, such as schooling. By definition, virtues have a teleology, they produce goods or outcomes. The goal gives an accountability against which the value of an action may be measured. The utilitarian principle initially worked well in cultures where an overlay of past values gave sufficient common ground for shared priorities: for example in Britain a concept of polite decency, in the USA a concept of a nation under providential deity, to be simplistic. But since WWII and especially in the past two decades the prevailing moral discourse has taken us to a high temperature rights agenda, often focused on sub-group divisions, to a world now of intersectional interest.

As society begins to reject longstanding grounds of common agreement on what is best for all, we have rapidly moved not only away from many shared practices and shared ends towards an emphasis on autonomy and rights, which is almost all we can agree upon. The radical nature of autonomy referred to in the title of this lecture is the sense in which I am free to make any decision I like as long as no one is harmed. It is a view of the individual taken to an extreme and in that extreme accountability to others can easily be lost, including an accountability to one's own

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[3] Fitzmaurice, Marian(2010) *'Considering teaching in higher education as a practice'*, Teaching in Higher Education, 15: 1, 45 — 55. URL: **http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562510903487941**

best interests. The concept of harm becomes very subjective. As Jonathan Haidt[4], referencing Shweder, has clearly shown, in the West the basis for acceptable moral decision making is no longer based on an external divine or community standard but on this standard of autonomy: behaviour is acceptable as long as no one is harmed, but it is easiest for this default position to exist when the value of relationships is already eroded.

Individualism has morphed to a personally isolating **radical** autonomy and the so called "wicked" problems of competing rights. There are of course strong arguments to be made that this individualism is in synergy with a market oriented view of economics, and a political view of society as fundamentally an economic one, in the west, with the capitalist world rewarding individualistic drive. It has had its instrumentalist rewards.

But the price is being paid in the area of interpersonal love, relationship and human connection.

There is some confronting data which faces us: There is a loneliness epidemic sweeping the West.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0xW30YXOctQ

One in four Australians feel lonely at least once a week (Australian Red Cross Survey 2017)

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[4] Haidt, J, *The Righteous Mind*, Vintage Books New York 2012

"A high proportion of Americans say they always or sometimes feel alone (46%) or left out (47%). 54% said they sometimes or always feel that no one knows them well. These patterns reproduce across the English speaking world…

He added: "There's immense pressure" from parents and other authority figures "to focus on the self, at the expense of relationships"—pressure, quite a few 20-somethings told me that extends right on through college.[5]"

"About 60 percent of adults under age 35 now live without a spouse or a partner. One in three adults in this age range live with their parents, making that the most common living arrangement for the cohort. People who live with a romantic partner tend to have sex more than those who don't—and living with your parents is obviously bad for your sex life. But this doesn't explain why young people are partnering up less to begin with. [6]"

The postponement of long term permanent sexual commitment/marriage is a feature of younger adult life, correlated with success and achievement first, relationship later.

Does this shift in social behaviours emerge and affect the political sphere?

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[5] Howe, N, *Millenials and the Loneliness Epidemic* www.forbes .com May 3, 2019

[6] Julian, K, *The Sex Recession* The Atlantic December 2018

"In the increasing absence of local, personal forms of fellowship and solidarity…people [are] naturally drawn to mass movements, cults of personality, nationalistic fantasias. [7]"

"In the future, it seems, there will be only one "ism" — Individualism — and its rule will never end. As for religion, it shall decline; as for marriage, it shall be postponed; as for ideologies, they shall be rejected; as for patriotism, it shall be abandoned; as for strangers, they shall be distrusted. Only pot, selfies and Facebook will abide — and the greatest of these will probably be Facebook.[8]"

Sadly these dark prognostications are being realised. Deaths of Despair are rising rapidly with opiod addiction and abuse of other prescription drugs, alcoholism, suicide on the increase, as well as the expected link to increasing mental health issues. There has been an exceptionally rapid rise in suicide (Over 70% since 2012 [9]) for females in the teen years and deaths of despair in men unable to access the work force or meaningful roles in life. There is a strong echo of the Christian term *acedia* in these patterns. *Acedia* is a listlessness and lack of desire to live effectively and meaningfully that is found in the solitary and disconnected.

As the poet Yeats starkly prophesied "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold".

Well, that sounds bleak! Of course it is not the whole story, and there are plenty of exceptions, but the trends are disturbing. So what is the relevance of and for schooling? This individualism has driven an approach to education which

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[7] Douthat,R,*New York Times* March 15 2014
[8] Douthat,R, *op.cit*.
[9] Twenge, J M, *iGen*, pp 110-11, Atria New York 2017

emphasises individual outcomes, competiveness in access to the opportunities of further study and work and countless pushes towards success in testing as the measure of quality in our schools. In the broader discourse the curriculum is to serve this sorting process, and sits under it, not over it. In the context of McIntyre's framing the pursuit of achievement is for goods/outcomes external to schooling.

How does such a troubling context challenge us in **our** roles in schools, particularly Christian Schools? I think it calls for deep consideration of **our** practices, and I believe there is an inspiring opportunity for us in this moment.

I think it is helpful for us to reflect briefly upon a term generated by Charles Taylor, **"a social imaginary"**.[10] By social imaginary Taylor means something different to purely theoretical constructs such as communism or market based economics. Taylor is:

"thinking, rather, of the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations.

There are important differences between social imaginary and social theory. I adopt the term imaginary (i) because my focus is on the way ordinary people "imagine" their social surroundings, and this is often not expressed in theoretical terms, but is carried in images, stories, and legends. It is also the case that (ii) theory is often the possession of a small

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[10] Taylor, C, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham NC 2004

minority, whereas what is interesting in the social imaginary is that it is shared by large groups of people, if not the whole society. Which leads to a third difference: iii) the social imaginary is that common understanding that makes possible common practices and a widely shared sense of legitimacy."[11]

Firstly, I think schools need to embrace and promote the fact that they are powerful sources of community, and in each one there is a social imaginary. We have the faith that can put our lives into a transcendent perspective. We have the shared stories, images and legends that bind our community together. Our independent schools can be pressured to throw off or minimise their traditions in the market place, but the story of each school community with its past heroes and high moments is to be prized. Both the children and the adults (staff and parents), in the vast majority of cases, want to belong and need to belong. For many this is the only significant community in their lives. The motivation for this is the connection to others, a shared purpose, a joint noble project of forming the next generations. Do we just accept this or do we actually work on it **intentionally** as a positive objective? I suggest that as Christian organisations this nurture of the community must be amongst our highest priorities. How do our transactions in the classroom, our work in the co-curricular program, our pastoral and disciplinary methods, our relationships between the adults of the community all come together to demonstrate a love of the other, a commitment to their flourishing? Our young people watch and learn and we have a

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[11] Taylor, C, *op.cit.*, p 23

duty to model for them the deep satisfaction that comes from healthy professional and personal relationships. The research is overwhelming that connectedness at school is one of the strongest protective factors for teenagers when it comes to mental health. If we do this well we build into them a desire for such an experience to continue into adulthood. By this I mean that schools must nurture and pursue the creation of an organisation of trust in which the pressure on the young to merely appear to engage in order to maintain the appropriate image is abraded by the benefits of security and significance offered in school.

Is there a biblical metaphor for our use in reflecting upon the relational basis of schools? Schools are obviously communal organisations. I have often argued that in the modern Western world schools are the last remaining sources of community identity in many contexts. They are, in biblical terms, covenantal households. The word covenant is useful for us as we reflect upon a community that has a Christian foundation. It is a biblical term which reflects the agreements that God enters into on the basis of his promise and to which his people bind themselves. *I will be your God and you will be my people.*

Indeed our parent body has entered into a covenant with the school on the basis of the enrolment agreement which at Shore states.

We acknowledge that the school is a Christian community and that behaviours and attitudes based on Christian values are encouraged.

The community has a right to expect the individual to be part of that covenant agreement through membership of the school, and the individual has a right to be embraced and nurtured. The covenant community is a practice, which produces goods internal to itself, largely in this lecture context, the goods of whole relationships.

We see such covenants embodying groups as much if not more than as individuals. When God covenants with Abram, it is a covenant with promises to Abram's descendants (Genesis 15) and in Genesis 17 the covenant commitment that Sarah will bear a son is sealed by the circumcision of all males of the household. This will have included the servants and any relatives living in the household. This extended notion of the household to include all living under the patronage, discipline and protection of the household head is significant, even specifying obligations upon the alien and stranger within the household. When the Passover is it instituted in Exodus 12 the representative sacrifice and consequent protection will be for households, although the head of the household bears responsibility for carrying out the required actions. Famously, Joshua's declaration during the renewal of the people's covenant at Shechem is one that states categorically that he and his household will serve the Lord. (Joshua 24:15).

The head's responsibility for the household is not only reflected in God's covenanted blessing but also in God's judgement, which, for example, falls not on Pharaoh alone in Genesis 12, but also upon his household.

This pattern repeats in the New Testament, where covenant commitments as exemplified in baptism for the household (*oikos*) are recorded for Cornelius (Acts 10:48), Lydia (Acts 16:15), the Philippian jailer (Acts 16:31), Crispus (Acts18:8) and Stephanus (1 Corinthians 1:16). In other references the promise of salvation blessing is made to households: Zaccheus (Luke 19:9), the official (John 4:53 and Onesiphorous (2 Timothy 1:16).

The image of the Household is a fundamentally inclusive one. That is to say we have a ministry to all in our community and not just to the believing elements of it. Chapel is compulsory for all because it is an expression of what "this House" does. But inclusivity also emphasises the duty of the Household to care for the vulnerable and weak. For example Boaz's commitment in love to his distant relatives Ruth and Naomi or the regular reminders in scripture to care for the widows, orphans and strangers. As a comprehensive School part of our witness will be always most effectively expressed by our authentic inclusion of and service for the marginalised. These are at most risk in a highly competitive and individualistic world.

The Household is also a place where people are formed, in exposure to the person of Jesus Christ and the values and virtues we share. In turn it is the responsibility of all to help form the Household and sustain it. It cannot simply be top down in its relational dynamics. Every child and adult builds the community or erodes it by their actions and habits.

The importance of the wise elder who disciplines, teaches, shapes and encourages the young learner in a context of community is central. The traditional models of apprenticeship, guild and college were dependent upon these principles. The appropriate behaviours, virtues and actions are modelled and focused for the intern, novice or apprentice to learn from.

Whilst acknowledging the impossibility, if not danger, of using this Household model as a one to one mapping, such an orientation can guide us to key **stances** and **practices** in our schools. These stances and practices need to model the qualities of dependent, trusting, respectful relationships. The adults need to model the vulnerability, love and emotional authenticity which enables us to be interdependent. The work of David I Smith, Beth Green and Trevor Cooling has given us insight into what the differences might be and I recommend Smith's recent writing on this.[12] I am particularly drawn to the stance or practice of Hospitality in the classroom. Hospitality has for two thousand years been a deep expression of the gospel, perhaps most powerfully symbolised in the Lord's Supper. Can the teacher be the host, conceiving of her class members as guests? What effect on relationships would such a stance take: their needs rather than ours, for instance? What does classroom engagement look like in such a context; a parroting of prepared thoughts or a family tangle of discussion at dinner? Certainly more than lip service to student voice. Do students sense welcome in their learning, and do they realise that as guests

[12] Smith, D I, On Christian Teaching, Eerdmans Grand Rapids 2018

they bring a contribution to the table? Smith urges us to be "seeing our classrooms through the lenses of grace, justice, beauty, delight, virtue, faith, hope, and love".[13]

Even if our young people do not accept faith as members of the Household, the formation of their values is an important aspect of the way our schools as human institutions can mitigate the consequences of the fall in this world. This is of course an expression of the Doctrine of Common Grace. Common Grace as extended to all and is categorised by Berkhof as:

- Universal Common Grace extended to all creatures in the universe,

- General Common Grace extended to all humanity and

- Covenant Common Grace which is the benefit that all who are in the sphere of the covenant community (in our case the School) whatever their personal faith position.[14]

This latter point is a very important one as it to some extent answers the question of the relevance of the faith life of the School to all its members. The Christian faith and life of the institution benefits all members, believers and unbelievers alike.

The members of the school and its community are bound through promise, formal in the terms of the enrolment contract and informal in a covenant of mutual obligation, responsibility and trust. However, informally the nature and quality of the relationships are the primary outcome. These are goods internal to the practice of

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[13] *Op. cit*, p 71

[14] Berkhof, l, *Systematic Theology*, 4th Edition, pp 434-435 Eerdmans, Grand Rapids MI, 1979

schooling in this mindset, to use the language of McIntyre. The concept of covenant household forms a practice which drives the development of deeper, beyond transactional, relationships. Promise making and promise keeping are foundational to Christian models of family[15] and must also be foundational to the life of the school if we are to reflect God's model of relationship.

One of the logical consequences of this is that the head and board must nurture the community as community, and do so from a Christian perspective. In a Christian school the role of the head will be different because as well as instructional leader, disciplinarian or magistrate and CEO, the head is also a pastor. But she cannot do the task alone, nor can the board. The health of the body is everyone's responsibility: staff, students, parents.

Another consequence of such a model is the challenge to consider deeply the concept of excellence. Our schools pursue excellence, and our parents expect it. But in what ways and with what objects do we do so?

I suggest one point of focus for us to consider is the nature of what we do in the classroom. The question I pose is this: do we see ourselves as Experts introducing Novices to material/ideas/content which we know, or as wise elders introducing material/ideas/content to young people whom we love? In that process do we ask young people to sit with us in humility under the learning, rather than over it; to

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[15] Dykstra,C, *Growing in the Life of Faith*, 2nd Edition, chapter 7 Westminster John Knox press Louisville KY 2005

read and think with an openness to being changed for the better? Currently, our education systems are in danger of merely valuing learning for what it facilitates. It is divorced from wisdom because our priority is short term knowledge. I do hope that our schools will seize the likely reduction in mandated content likely to emerge in NSW and seek to use the opportunity for more depth of understanding and deep engagement rather than adding simply different "stuff". Excellence, will then be seen in terms of well-equipped young people with a vision to be of use to others, and the confidence to be so, rather than simply achievers in a worldly sense. Can we as schools move past the list of achievements to tell stories of lives transformed and different pathways taken?

In our current cultural crisis of isolation and stunted relationships, our schools can be a voice for an alternative of flourishing, based upon belonging and respectful community which models itself on the biblical concept of a household. There are no easy quick fixes for us but we would hope to see our people engaged as full members of a Kingdom oriented learning community, who understand that the answer for us lies not in cold autonomy but in deep dependence on each other in community and on our God in Christ.