

Armitage Lecture Response 2019  
Dr Paul Burgis, PLC Sydney

Dr Tim Wright, members of Shore College Council, Special Guests, staff and students. It is an honour for me to say a few words in reply to Dr Wright's insightful address on how we might understand ourselves; and how our schools might be understood as building persons within our society. It is a society that appears to be losing its hold upon its sense of community even as it tries to value inclusivity.

I do agree with you Dr Wright that schools can provide the model of community that students need, a type of domestic counter-culture. You are right that schools are households. They are families that they form young humans. I hope each boy here realises the ways that they have been shaped by Shore, even if they hold fundamental disagreements with it in regard to aspects of their lives. And I agree with your diagnosis, Dr Wright, drawn from MacIntyre and Taylor, amongst others, that a society that describes everything as ultimately being about power, and the right of individuals to define themselves utterly, loses that critical contemplation of the question of what is good and beautiful and true. As a result we 'atomise'. Life becomes the task of coercing others whilst not being coerced ourselves. This makes us lonely and deeply unfulfilled.

We are too much the children of Richard Rorty, who valued the new over the true.

As I listened to you I wondered why we have chosen this. I thought of two quite ancient texts. The first was Plato's *The Republic*. In it the story is told within it of Gyges, a poor peasant who finds a cave in the earth. In it he finds a sarcophagus, and within it the decayed body of a dead ruler. He is able to take the ring off the ruler's finger, and place it on his own. With a sharp turn of the ring, he becomes invisible. With this new power he is able to break into the palace of the local tyrant, commit adultery with the queen, kill the king, and usurp his throne.

The point is that each of us is a Gyges. I can see your actions but I don't know your intentions. You are invisible to me, and I to you. I don't really know if you will betray my trust. People can lie in business, as in personal relations. Even the trust built on promises and intimate love in marriage can and does fail. How might we respond to this? Your insight Dr Wright is that our society's two recent approaches to this question both involve us in deciding to deeply mistrust each other. On the one hand, we see ourselves as all in competition with each other – antelopes trying to outrun hungry lions and lions trying to snare antelopes. My own autonomy, my own will, is the thing I must prize. On the other hand, we try to knock the tall poppies down. We protest in the name of equity. We seek to recognise the people who are most likely to be the victims of Gyges' tricks and to protect them from harm. We use them as icons to limit the influence of the powerful. It is not the king and queen we are worried about, but his fellow peasants that Gyges hopes to rule. In the name of equity we try to save the antelopes and stigmatise the lions.

Dr Wright, you reminded us that both aspects of this type of society makes us lonely. Both groups deal with power as the central currency. We are lonely because we have decided that self-actualisation, or the limiting of it in others, is all that matters. Our task is to coerce others and to limit others from coercing us. Our radical autonomy thus makes us anxious. And schools can easily reflect these values. The task of the school is to give its students sufficient power to not be coerced. Utility (marks, access to jobs, access to leadership) is what matters. But you, Dr Wright, have led a school where you are cogniscent of this environment, and you know that Shore boys must find a place in this world, but also where you recognise that human flourishing, and in particular, human conscience and agency matter.

Milbank and Pabst said that much education goes wrong because none of us can really ever become anyone else. The really valuable thing about our individualism is that we can only really ever be ourselves. And good schools, like Shore, help us become the best versions of ourselves that we can be. You value the individual not to tell him to become Gyges, but to be a person of integrity – where his intentions and his actions are oriented towards community, towards the common good.

And this brings me to me second ancient text: Jesus' sermon on the Mount. You put Christ front and centre of your address Dr Wright.

But first, I wish to recall a recent item in the news that I thought of when I read your address. Recently the town of Cowra remembered the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the escape of 1100 prisoners of war from internment camps. 231 Japanese POWS and four

Australians died in the subsequent days. But this was not the key event. It was the act of the President of the RSL, Albert Oliver, that we remember. Oliver, in 1952, decided to renew and then maintain the graves of the dead Japanese. This act of generosity led to a renewed friendship and relationship with Japan.

Jesus placed the human conscience, our personhood, at the centre of his teaching.

Like Plato he knew that we were invisible to each other. In his famous sermon he said to love all persons, even our enemies, to turn the other cheek. Albert Oliver is a man who did this, and thus who built a sense of community, love and respect.

Notice that Albert was not the representative of a slave morality. He was a free man, acting freely. He chose to love not to be subservient, but to build a culture of generosity towards others. Like the household metaphor you referenced, he valued the visitor, the stranger. He practised forgiveness. Now the state must deal with enacting justice (an eye for an eye was a rule that limited people taking twenty eyes for the loss of one), but the human heart can focus on enabling love.

Schools must embrace new technologies, with their tremendous benefits, and deeply skill students for life. Shore under your leadership has done this Dr Wright. Yet we need also to teach students to be wary of thinking technology or science is all that matters. The technology that gives us potable water in plastic bottles also gives us oceans of plastic waste.

Schools now largely project themselves as being about 21<sup>st</sup> Century thinking. You have helped us link past, present and future. It is essential to know where we are

going, but we travel much better if we also know where we have been, and how we came to travel this route. The study of history is not simply the story of a litany of sins or of the abuse of power, much as this is a significant theme. It is the story also which seeks to answer the questions: 'What is a human being?' and, 'What does it mean to be human?', and 'How do we flourish?'. And in this I am so very grateful that you remind us Dr Wright that we are made in God's image, that we have ineliminable value. We are not first and foremost identities based on our nation state, or family name; our gender or sexuality, our race or social status. We have an inherent personhood. We are made in God's image. In Christ we live and move and have our being.

I am reminded when I listen to you of the beautiful writing of Marilynne Robinson, Barack Obama's favourite author. She wrote about the human mind in order to emphasise the existence of each of us as persons, to use her language, as 'souls':

*Having read recently that there are more neurons in the human brain than there are stars in the Milky Way, and having read any number of times that the human brain is the most complex object known to exist in the universe, and that the mind is not identical with the brain but is more mysterious still, it seems to me this astonishing nexus of self, so uniquely elegant and capable, merits a name that would indicate a difference in kind from the ontological run of things, and for my purposes "soul" would do nicely.*

I can think of few more important things that you could say to your community as you draw close to retirement, Dr Wright, than they have minds that are not just composed of brain cells. They have a personhood.

And, like you, Dr Wright, I feel a great sense of hope. Yes, because our society has lost key elements of its unifying core, and, as a result, we are vulnerable to think everything is just a personal choice or protest for equity and that truth, goodness and beauty are elusive.

One part of the hope we can have comes as we reflect, after school, on exactly what it was that made Shore tick. I ask the boys what brought a sense of community and meaning to your daily lives at Shore? Think of what our common definition of goodness might be. The Sermon on the Mount has more to commend it than Nietzsche's model of the radical human will. It is better to pursue a life of love than a life of power. Jesus' notion of service and self-sacrifice, of forgetting yourself to serve others is better than radical self-promotion. And a belief in the goodness and grace of God as expressed each Easter in Christ's loving sacrifice for us as the basis of meaning-making, outstrips a sense that all we have as an option is the assertion of our own power and passion.

Thank you Dr Wright for helping us to think through the types of individuals we might become and the type of society we want to collectively inhabit, not just tonight, but every day of your headship at Shore.

You have led with deep thought and conviction, and you have encouraged us to learn to love radically.