

B–9, Room: 30 Reframing the Creative Christian Voice in a Traditional Presbyterian Boys' School

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Intellect and feeling with little capacity to love, no ideals to cherish, and an impoverished view of humanity, can never be substitutes for the creative quest for wisdom.

How does Christian heritage, as a quest for contemporary spiritual experience and creative expression, find meaning in the culture of a traditional boys' school?

*The integration of faith and learning involves far more than the conjunction of liberal learning and student formation. The ideal of liberal neutrality continues to be problematic in twenty-first century faith-based educational institutions. C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* warned that the educational outcome of creeping secularization and the abolition of Christian tradition would effectively make us "men without chests."*

The 'unearthing of creativity' begins with a search for integrity where convictions, character and community intersect.

This workshop will stimulate and explore practical and theoretical discussion and reflection around the notion that Christian beliefs provide theological foundations for knowledge, creativity and art; introduce truths that would otherwise be ignored; and give coherence to a worldview, culture and set of values that honour the life and creative expression of a boy. How does a school leader recreate and reform faith expression in a traditional school? What does it mean to learn, lead and serve? How can theology and philosophy, the sciences of meaning, provide a secure foundation for boys to play, innovate, challenge, risk, adventure and create? Join us in this workshop as we explain and explore 'unearthing of creativity' through our quest for excellence, faith and tradition, and leadership through teams.

Introduction

C.S. Lewis in *The Abolition of Man* warned that the educational outcome of creeping secularization and the abolition of Christian tradition would effectively make us "men without chests." For many and various reasons the identity and mission of many schools who have adopted a more generic liberal expression of faith are no longer informed by their founding Christian vision and ethos. Under the conditions of postmodernism in which the Enlightenment paradigm has been deposed or at least fractured, it has become increasingly attractive and imperative to represent a diversity of voices and perspectives in the ongoing life of an independent boys' school. Such a trend requires weighty consideration, especially in historic schools where the essential Christian doctrines have been sharply explicated and defended over many decades, even centuries.

This, however, is not necessarily a recent reversal. A sacred-secular dualism is understood to be operative in many long established church schools. A former housemaster and Senior English Master of the Leys School, Cambridge, who detected such a division in educational practice back in 1942, typifies this:

“Scripture is taught, sermons are preached, prayers are said, confirmations are carried out and what is the result of all this educational effort? [...] The schoolboy seems to regard his chapel as a quaint survival, an educational enigma, a symbol of ineffectiveness or an instrument of yet further torture in the hands of an inscrutable authority, but apparently from his behavior when he has left he does not think it has any relevance to life.”

The Christian vision and ethos have indeed played a powerful role in the lives of the vast majority of Western civilization. They continue to play such a role: why shouldn't they have a role to play in a school that was founded and nurtured by a particular tradition within that larger Christian account? How might one even begin to entertain such a thought? By reconnecting with the heritage of those who have gone before with those who enliven that heritage today, a new and creative quest for meaningful community life, human creativity and service may be born. After all, a tradition, in the words of G.K. Chesterton, is a democracy in which the dead have a vote.

Experiment, adventure, creativity, play and challenge serve to encourage curiosity and wonder from our youngest to our most senior boys. In many ways, it is the concept of 'play' that nurtures our imagination and curiosity. It is 'playing around' that enables us to put together ideas that haven't been put together before. Exploring, messing around in the world, getting our hands dirty; all this enables boys to make connections and see relationships that they would otherwise not have encountered. Keeping a Christian or founding religious voice audible in the larger conversation can and should give boys space to see things from different angles, freeing them from the tunnel vision of logical processing and thus freeing them for different ways of knowing.

Creativity and a Sense of Self

Little has been written about the falling off of creativity among boys; it is, however, an ominous trend. Creativity, the ability to look at things from a fresh perspective, is an underrated but critical life skill.

Creative thinking gives us a range of tools to try when problems don't respond to the usual corrections. A boy may typically respond to gentle humor when he's feeling down, but not always. If you also know how to invite him to talk, how to leave him alone, how to suggest activities, how to allow distance, then your chances of helping him are greatly increased. The larger our toolbox, the more we can be creative and "think outside the box," and the more likely we are to come up with effective solutions.

Boys need this same ability to think flexibly and creatively when they find themselves having social, academic, family or personal issues. The falling off of creativity should alert us to the fact that boys have a smaller and smaller toolbox to dig into when they are unhappy, conflicted or perplexed. Whenever we prematurely solve problems for

boys, we deprive them of the opportunity to come up with novel solutions that allow them to add another tool to their arsenal. We also deprive them of the sense of competence that comes with figuring things out on ones own.

We need to be conscious of one of the most important task of childhood and adolescence: the development of a sense of self. Autonomy, what we commonly call independence, along with competence and interpersonal relationships, are considered to be inborn human needs. This development is central to mental health. In a supportive and respectful community, boys go about the business of forging a "sense of self" by being exposed to, and learning to manage, increasingly complex personal and interpersonal challenges.

Maintaining a Christian voice assists in developing a secure, reliable, welcoming internal structure that we call the "self" in a boy's life. The traditional trajectory of adolescence - withdrawal, irritability, defiance, rejection of parental values, the trying on and discarding of different identities, and, finally, the development of a stable identity – in contemporary society seems to have given way to a far less successful trajectory. What looks like healthy assimilation into the family and community -- getting high grades, conforming to parents' and community standards, and being receptive to the interests and activities valued by others -- may be deceptive. Boys can present as models of competence and still lack a fundamental sense of who they are. This is called the "false self."

Ultimately, motivation for any venture needs to feel like it comes from inside. When it does, it feels "true"; when it comes from outside, it feels "empty." Working primarily to please others and to gain their approval takes time and energy away from a boy's real job of figuring out their authentic gifts, talents, skills and interests. The "false self" becomes particularly problematic in adolescence as boys are required to confront the normal proliferation of "selves" and figure out who is the "real me."

We need to continually examine our educational paradigm. Educating boys has come to look more and more like a business endeavor and less and less like an endeavor of the heart. We have to be careful not to be overly concerned with "the bottom line," with how our boys "do" rather than with who our boys "are."

Boys Need Character; Boys Need Beauty

Educating a boy is our quest to shape the character of a young man. The writer and poet Sir Walter Scott wrote in 1825 that:

“We shall never learn to feel and respect our real calling and destiny, unless we have taught ourselves to consider everything as moonshine, compared with the education of the heart.”

So how should we respond to this? How should we be balancing the competing demands of a changing contemporary society and enduring Christian values? What sort of man should emerge from his boyhood? Paul's Letter to the Philippians 4: 8 offers this advice to us: "Fix your thoughts on what is true and honourable and right."

In order to give our boys the best opportunity to become this type of man, we need to equip them with essential knowledge and skills to provide meaning and develop understanding both of their own and other people's perspectives. We need to empower them to move forward from their time at school ready to excel in whatever field their hearts dictate. We seek to prepare them in such a way that they are able to solve problems, to work in teams, and to insist on high standards in all that they do.

An education in the creative and performing arts is an essential part of a boy's education. As boys learn about and participate in numerous musical, dramatic and artistic forms and genres, they learn about and begin to celebrate the richness and depth of human expression and the nature of love and relationships. How, then, do we go about cultivating this rich experience for our boys?

If our school has a Christian foundation and practice, we might begin by understanding that the whole world – and all that is true and beautiful in it – belongs to God. Ideas about culture not only set the parameters for human involvement, but also shape the character of popular culture and criticism and determine what the legitimate roles are for popular culture to serve. It is hoped that our boys' educational enterprises should always seek to contribute to the larger task of developing and sustaining a fair and rigorous Christian intellectual criticism – one that investigates weakness, takes pleasure in achievements, celebrates virtues, laments and learns from failed opportunities.

In equipping young men for cultural leadership, we should rest our endeavours and exploration upon the following three pillars: help preserve the best features; improve the weakest parts; and eliminate the worst traits of popular culture. Such an educational perspective openly acknowledges that the vision of life that an individual person or an interpretative community such as ours holds, is fashioned through a complex process involving relational learning, and sincere exploration of spiritual, cultural, and worldview expression, celebration and reflection.

The arts help all of us to comprehend our world better, and the insights of their practitioners stimulate and challenge thought within the scholarly disciplines. They generate a rich array of reciprocal benefits for our boys and our community. They enhance the vitality of our society. In seeking to nurture and value creativity and innovation, we need to continue to build upon the very strong foundation that has been established by our tremendous staff, students and support groups, and continue to look for places within and across the curriculum where new ideas and forms of expression can flourish. At the same time, by participating in the arts, our boys develop cognitive abilities and forms of intelligence that complement training in other disciplines, and in some cases

they discover talents and interests that will shape their careers and principal avocations. The habits of mind that one acquires through the arts spill over into every other occupation.

The arts can also be a source of solitude. A place where a boy can shut out the things around him so he can create an alternative space. He's imagining something. He's finding time, both literal and psychological, to linger in internal exploration; a necessary precursor to a well developed sense of self. Fantasies, daydreaming, thinking about oneself and one's future, even just "chilling" are critical processes in self-development and cannot be hurried. Every boy has a different timetable, and most are ahead of the pack in some areas and behind in others. We do well to remember "late bloomers" like Albert Einstein, John Steinbeck, Benjamin Franklin and J.R.R. Tolkein.

Boys find it hard to process emotions on their own: so much of their verbal and physical vocabulary turns any experience or feeling into anger. The arts can be the agent through which complexity of emotion can be learned, rehearsed, played with and fine-tuned. It can provide access to the sublime and noble, it can be tawdry and mundane. It can help them work through unhappiness, it can help them delight in the world. It can define their growing sense of independence and interdependence.

A life of incoherent rage is bewildering; an opportunity to deflect and shape this energy and sentiment into a pre-packaged experience of emotion is a tremendous way of learning about what it means to be a man. There is enough room in the arts to allow boys to experience feelings in safe boundaries and yet at the same time leave them room to interpret things in their own way.

Be adventurous, be ambitious, be creative, and be flexible

With increasing frequency, the most academically gifted boys have deeply felt commitments to some aspect of the arts. For the most part these students do not aspire to become professional artists, but they seek an environment where they can integrate their academic pursuits with their artistic passions. They become not only music scholars and art historians but also physicists and philosophers; not only English and comparative literature scholars but economists and engineers. Their talent and imagination are visible in every corner of the community, adding a distinctive dimension to intellectual inquiry and enriching our lives with a breath-taking array of exhibits, performances and creative endeavours.

To fully realize this exciting and distinctive vision of the creative and performing arts, we must keep uppermost three fundamental aspirations. The first is to grow our educational programs in a way that nurtures and sustains connections between adults and boys. The second is to provide a school curriculum that is responsive to the needs of all students with special artistic interests and talents, and not only to those who concentrate in learning areas that bear an obvious relationship to the arts. The third is

to pursue an environment in which every boy, every year, has an opportunity for meaningful and significant experience with the arts during his time at school.

In the decades ahead of us, boys living in the technological world will increasingly move into an era where creativity and innovation will become the hallmarks of a successful person and enterprise. As our production and manufacturing industries shrink, new opportunities will emerge for those who will become the leaders of ideas. Communication, innovation, critical analysis and reflection will become the new core skills. More fundamentally, we will come to see that skills, insights and experiences gained through participation in, and celebration of, the creative and performing arts will provide a distinctive and valuable medium for comprehending the challenges of our age and for increasing our understanding of ourselves, our neighbours and others with whom we share this planet.

What a privilege to be in the position we are in today – what an opportunity for our boys! To succeed, they need a life built on strong values and good character, rounded and enhanced by a deep appreciation of and love for the beauty that the arts bring to all of us.

Christian heritage and the quest for contemporary spiritual experience and creative expression

In an increasingly technological society that sees science as a critical source for solutions to many societal challenges, it seems that a shift of focus is emerging in a postmodern context. Poets, artists and intuitive thinkers are regaining some social, spiritual and political influence, correcting the scientific imbalance by challenging us to recognize, develop, and properly exercise the imagination.

The word imagination defines our ability to visualize and bring into focus mental images. The word image, in turn, is derived from *imitari*, to imitate, and is akin to the word symbol, meaning "the same as." Metaphor adds the idea of transference of meaning from one subject or object over to another, linking the two by analogy. An image or symbol is a likeness to reality. It is *like* and also *unlike* (it is not identical). Real and authentic enough of itself, a symbol points to a more meaningful reality. It is our imagination that transfers the symbols to another level, on which we perceive their meaning.

A sculptor will see something in his mind and then reproduce it in bronze or marble. A composer will be moved by a visual image or experience and allow that image etched on the mind to become a musical form. C.S. Lewis commented on his facility for creating story: "Everything began with images.... " and again, "With me the process is much like bird-watching ... I see pictures."

A careful analysis of our individual schools' histories will more often than not reveal a consistent theme, conviction and motivation underpinning the purposes and priorities of our founding institutions, individuals and communities. Typically, the essential questions of life: meaning, purpose, and conduct, served to define and direct an intellectual tradition and a lived educational and communal reality expressed and embodied in an ethos, and a way of life. Under the influence of the sponsoring tradition's vision, ethos and leadership a religious vision and narrative provided a powerful platform for learning and creative expression.

Widespread secularization of all facets of contemporary life over time has led to the gradual removal of religious control and influence in differing degrees in many long-established schools across the world. It could be argued that secularization is most dramatic in the very institutions that various churches and denominations created and shaped through direct control or pervasive influence. Historically, as churches and religious societies tried to answer human needs according to their own vision of human flourishing, they established schools, colleges, hospitals, orphanages, care for the elderly, camps and other social service agencies. At their founding, and through their early lives, these church institutions were often controlled and almost always pervasively influenced by a Christian understanding of human flourishing.

As secularization has proceeded, the number of persons – board members, administration, students, and teaching staff – identified with sponsoring traditions has receded. Along with them have gone the denominationally specific characteristics of ethos and intellectual tradition. Human expression, creativity and prophetic imagination, as expressed in and through that founding belief system, has been dispersed along with the perceived importance of anything having to do with the founding tradition. Moreover, after a while, the relevance of the tradition has become first an ignored feature of public discussion and then an unwelcome one. It has become more and more difficult to bring up that relevance among people who no longer share any allegiance to it.

Imagination: That Other Avenue to Truth

Truth is a complex topic, and an inscrutable word. It appears to be so serious, solemn and ultimate. It is rarely discussed in a modern conversation because there is nothing whimsical or casual about it. We cannot joke about it without feeling uneasy. It demands our serious thought, our total commitment, and still we are confounded by it. After all, thinking people have been searching for truth since the beginning of time and it has proved eternally elusive, even defying definition.

Although its form escapes us, we sense its relation to the way things really are, actuality beyond mere fact, the core, the root of things, the rock bottom. Because of its

disconcerting abstraction, its largeness and inscrutability, we must choose symbols to make it seem more manageable and more concrete in our quest for truth, knowledge and wisdom.

The history of art shows that people have a need for depicting things dear or important to them – the human image itself, the portrait of the beloved, the animals around us, the scenery that is important to us. People depict the things directly around them, sing about things they know, tell tales of the social world in which they live. Or must we rather say that these things, to some extent, become dear to us through depiction? The picture of the window view, the tale about the garden well, along with the objects with which we surround ourselves, such as old cartwheels and old weapons, help build emotional contact with, as well as an intellectual understanding of, those people or natural things around us, our environment. In this way art is related to life. It 'works' in conquering realities for us, opening up their meaning, deepening our love for them, focusing our attention and discovering hitherto unknown aspects. Humanity with little or no figurative art is poor in its relation to reality.

Art in this sense is constituted by reality as such, and, on the other hand, by our vision and understanding of that reality. In the tension between these two exists our appraisal and appreciation of the work of art: we like to see our vision affirmed, but we look for the true, the natural and real. Contrary to most critics today, we do not believe that quality is the ultimate, and maybe even only, criterion for art. Quality is a prerequisite. When this fails, we never come to assess the really important questions. The what, not the how, is the final test; quality is the first norm for art, but its final norm is love and truth, the enriching of human life, the deepening of our vision.

Every day for a boy is rich in opportunities in the classroom, on stage, on the sporting fields and the water, in the playground, out bush and in our places of worship. Our boys can and should receive plentiful encouragement from their community of opportunity: encouragement to be themselves, encouragement from and for their mates, encouragement to raise their standards ever higher.

Occasionally, this type of transformation can happen in moments of great epiphany. Most of the time, however, boys will grow into themselves little by little, building layers of experience and wisdom as they live through the minutes and hours of every day. For when all is done and dusted, we remember only a few of the details, but we are all measured by what sort of people we have become.

There are a number of special spheres of responsibility to which God calls us in life. He advises us to consider three aspects of our lives, each of which shape what may be seen as pivotal choices. Each of these three aspects is relatively given by divine decree; we do not choose them so much as discover ourselves within them. As such they both open and close possibilities for God's callings in our lives. One is aptitude, or gifts. The other two are our place in the life cycle and our place in history. Youth is the time of stepping

into freedom from the past for new opportunity; it is the time of preparation, hope and planning. The young are called to explore new possibilities and to be diligent in hope of a full harvest.

When a community stands united in celebration of its boys, it can provide a unique context in which young boys and men can celebrate this unique and special time in their lives. Through our service, commitment, generosity and prayer, we are more than well equipped to provide every boy with a unique journey of discovery and adventure that will honour his life, refine his beliefs and values, release his creativity, shape his leadership potential and equip him with a spirit of hope and possibility.

As a community, we need wisdom, generosity, forgiveness, faith, hope and love if we are to realize our vision of fine young men with brave hearts and bold minds not hollow chests. In the words of Mark Twain,

“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn’t do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”

It is our hope that all of our boys can find the inspiration to become fine young men of integrity and principle who support each other in their quest for excellence. Inherent in this is the notion of a community of care, based on values of faith, honesty and compassion in relationships, and respect for others. We should strive to empower each other to support one another, to lead with integrity and serve our community. We should recognize the value of each person, our strength in diversity, our obligation to care for one another. We must remain committed to acknowledging, nurturing, celebrating and extending the diverse gifts and abilities of all members of our community. Therefore, we recognize the importance of a safe and caring environment, in which students can thrive in learning, grow to be men of fine character and strive with others to achieve excellence together.

Every day in a boy’s life should be part of an exciting adventure. He should be challenged and know the true joy of achieving worthy and ambitious goals through his own meaningful work and through the efforts of the teams of which he is a valued member. We should value and learn all about our boys. We should inspire boys to learn, lead and serve as they strive for excellence together.

In doing so, we should aim to defend the honourable traditions, adventures and learning of boys. We should value the quest for excellence through adventure, curiosity, creativity and growth. We should draw on our faith and tradition, which inspire truth, honour, loyalty and commitment. We must believe passionately in leadership through teams in a spirit of service, compassion, humour and community.

Conclusion

Our founding vision and ethos would warn us of the dangers of a post secularist spirituality and argues that we must recover an authentic experience of the spiritual as an integral component of ordinary experience. We live in a time where there is a desperate craving for an account of reality, which sets life in a framework of meaning and purpose. Our personal stories need to be seen to be embedded within a larger story that is ultimately cosmic in scope, a story that furnishes a normative and not merely mechanical explanation, and makes sense of humanity's implicit awareness that there is more to life than meets the eye.

The Christian mind does not appear fully formed but emerges, in what is really a lifelong process of learning. Nor is it an individual achievement; the Christian mind belongs to the Body of Christ and is developed through communal endeavor. Harry Blamires in *The Christian Mind* wrote it is a "public pool of discourse fed by christianly committed thought on the world we live in. It cannot be nurtured in isolation."

The community is not limited to the present era. The task is one in which generations of Christians join as heirs of the biblical tradition in which truly Christian scholarship must be rooted. It is a community that is also geographically and culturally dispersed, yet the forces, which it confronts, have a certain commonality. Our heritage and foundations always remind us of the importance of context. The authentic Christian mind has always been attuned to history, minding the times, and in this time of postmodernity Christians are called once more not to succumb to the spirit of the age but nonetheless to take it seriously in their address of it. Central to any discussion of teaching methodology or content should be a consideration of the nature of the learner as well as of what constitutes knowledge and truth.

One of the more evident developments in Western society over recent years has been a renewal of interest in spirituality and the spiritual. It signals a growing dissatisfaction with a secularism that has marginalized what is, in fact, a fundamental component of human experience. In this climate there is a challenge to Christian educators to develop educational strategies that will recover an authentic understanding of the spiritual in human life in the light of the Gospel and integrated with the experience of sense and reason. No issue is more important for educators working in traditional Church schools that support and promote a Christian vision and ethos than this: to recover for ourselves and our students an authentic and creative quest for wisdom and an experience of the spiritual, as an integral component of the everyday world. Our foundational faith and traditions may well provide the motivation and direction that will serve to unearth creativity in individual students and also serve to focus and direct the vision, mission, ethos and staff in preparation for the new challenges of the twenty-first century.