

HEADMISTRESS' LECTURE 2013

'HARMONY: RECONNECTING WITH THE TRUE PURPOSE OF EDUCATION'

Parents of young people today frequently express to me their growing concern about the welfare of girls and the heightened levels of anxiety with which they are living. Indeed, the incidence of mental health problems amongst adolescent girls has doubled in just five years. Since the beginning of the year there have been a number of articles and books focussing on the sexualisation of girls of pre-secondary school age and the toxic effect this is having on their future development as women. Indeed, there is equal concern surrounding the care of boys who are becoming increasingly disaffected and lacking in motivation to aspire to anything truly worthwhile.

This generation of young people is being swamped by materialism and sexualisation. They have been led to identify almost exclusively with the appearance of their physical bodies, their clothes, their material acquisitions and their qualifications. The deeper and more subtle aspects of their existence as human beings have been deprived of nourishment, rendering their experience superficial and their concerns petty. This has resulted in a self-centred perspective which makes them unable to relate to the world or to each other meaningfully, leaving them disconnected, dissatisfied and isolated.

Just as all creatures are bound to seek water to sustain life, this deprivation of the deeper aspects of our human existence will inevitably seek satisfaction, somehow. Our being longs for peace. The intellect thirsts for the enrichment of universal ideas which allow us to penetrate the causes of observed phenomena and discover the relationship between the limited and the limitless. Our hearts hear the echo of a deep resonance whose memory is of an original 'home' where all is one and one is all – unconditional love which is all embracing.

Impelled by the sense of being disconnected from this home, we desire to unite again in order to dissolve this existential misery of imagined separation. This is the birth of the essential desire for relationship which impels most of our human activity. We desire love through relationship with the 'other' in the attempt to reconnect with the origin which was, and is, always complete.

And indeed, if our education and social circumstances do not offer the best nourishment to satisfy this essential and universal hunger, the human being will devour whatever morsels are available even if they are incapable of providing ultimate and complete satisfaction. The poorer the quality of the food, the less the appetite will be satisfied. The rise in sexual promiscuity amongst the young is a symptom of a generation which is failing to find love: the deep nourishment which comes from the ability to form meaningful relationships.

The most serious issue facing the younger generation today is that they have been led into an emotional and spiritual desert where the pangs of their isolation are palpable. Above and

before all things, the human being depends upon loving relationship for its welfare, at all stages of life. The need to form trusting, nourishing and stable relationships lies at the core of all human activity and, without them, we lose touch with all that it means to be truly human.

And, alongside this, our educational system has, during the past few decades, lost touch with the importance of making the wealth of our intellectual and cultural inheritance available to the young. The diet we have fed them has become increasingly superficial, politicised and meagre in substance, like some thin, watery gruel. What has happened to the understanding that a good education is one which, first and foremost, shares the wealth of knowledge known to mankind across the generations? Have we forgotten that we have a duty to inspire the young by creating respect for those truly great works of our treasured authors, poets and musicians, thereby fostering the growth of the best virtues of our humanity? We need to provide the opportunity for the minds of young people to imbibe great ideas and universal concepts; having done so, they need to learn how to penetrate and examine them in depth and then reflect upon their meaning. This requires the cultivation of a respect for knowledge and the power of concentration. Unfortunately, the educational agenda of the past ten to fifteen years has omitted to place knowledge at the heart of education; instead it has sought to elevate the place of pupils' opinion to an unnatural height without giving them the knowledge with which to opine in the first place. Furthermore, the adult world is expected to grace such vacuous opinion with respect, elevating its status to that which should properly be given only to knowledge or wisdom. This idea has run away with itself to such an extent that in some schools, pupils sit with the governing body in the recruitment of teachers. This practice has contributed to an ugly and unnatural growth of arrogance in the young which seriously impedes the ability to learn anything really useful – especially from the 'conversations' of past generations. Respect for knowledge needs to be restored to its rightful place and a spirit of humility fostered: after all, without humility, there is no real enquiry.

In his recently published work entitled *Harmony*, His Royal Highness, the Prince of Wales sets out his view that humanity has become increasingly disconnected from the spiritual dimension of its existence and that this has resulted in a failure to understand what nature is telling us, globally and individually. He says that there has been a 'crisis of perception' within humanity: we have attempted to solve the world's problems by trying to fix the outer effects rather than looking to the causes which lie within the very nature of things.

"If we simply concentrate on fixing the outward problems without paying attention to this central inner problem, then the deeper problem remains, and we will carry on casting around in the wilderness for the right path without a proper sense of where we took the wrong turning."(p.6)

He goes on to propose that there is "a timeless view of things ...rooted in the human condition and in human experience" which understands nature and how to ensure well-being. He says that this knowledge is formulated in 'traditional philosophy' and that this wisdom is very simple:

"Perhaps it is worth remembering what that word 'philosophy' means. It is a combination of two Greek words: one meaning 'love of' and the other meaning 'wisdom'. So, to be a

‘philosopher’ is to be a lover of wisdom, and the wisdom this refers to is human wisdom, of the sort that has been handed down from generation to generation in all societies throughout the world. Until quite recently, this time-honoured wisdom framed the way all civilizations behaved. It emphasized the right way to see our relationship with the natural world, it taught in practical ways how to work with the grain of Nature rather than against it, and it warned of the dangers of overstepping the limits imposed by Nature on herself. In short, this wisdom emphasized the need for, and the means of maintaining, harmony.”(p.6-7)

So, we must ask the question, ‘What does it mean to work *with* the grain of human nature? Undoubtedly, the misery which is overflowing within the lives of our young people declares that something very unnatural is happening. Is there an innate knowledge which declares how a human being can realise happiness and fulfilment? Can we learn how to discern it so that we may live accordingly?

Unless the connection with wisdom “*which is rooted in the human condition*” is maintained, it is impossible to protect the natural balance upon which the wellbeing of everything depends. This wisdom is found within the spiritual domain of human nature. The word ‘spiritual’ is understood very differently and it is tricky to define. I rather liked The Prince’s description of it being “the dimension which is related to our intuitive feelings about things”. He explains that, in his view, there has been a growth in cynicism in the latter half of the twentieth century, which is coupled to a conviction that unless something can be proven as factually true and observable in material terms, it does not exist. As this view has gathered force and momentum, it has triggered a reaction which has resulted in two opposing fundamentalist camps – fundamentalist secularism and fundamentalist religions – both as dangerous as each other. This schism has marginalised, if not excluded, the philosophical and spiritual conversation which is based in the recognition that human beings have a deeper dimension to their existence which is accessed through insight or intuition. This spiritual dimension intuits the deeper meaning of things and hears the inner knowledge which resides in the heart of nature, our nature and the nature of all things. The Prince puts it like this:

“Our intuition is deeply rooted in the natural order. It is ‘the sacred gift’, as Einstein called it. Many sacred traditions refer to it as the voice of the soul: the link between the body and mind and therefore the link between the particular and the universal.”

An example of this power of intuition or ‘insight’ is from Plato’s dialogue *Philebus (16c)*:

“...the ancients who were superior to us and dwelt nearer to the gods have handed down a tradition that all things are said to consist of a One and a Many and contain in themselves the principles of Limit and Unlimitedness.” (p.101 Harmony)

This statement from Plato is full of profound insight: the multifarious forms of things are an expression of one universal life – unity expressing itself as multiplicity. This is not known with the senses. We intuitively recognise the truth of this statement with our deeper intelligence, the eye of the soul. It points to a most important matter: although we appear to be separate limited individuals, we do indeed participate in and are always connected to the greater whole of the universe. As such, we can intuit the deeper secrets of the limitless nature

of things and can be guided accordingly. We may well have had experience ourselves of occasional moments in our lives when we have connected with a deeper ‘knowing’, unconfined to the common personal kind of ‘knowing’. Something is revealed which is instantaneously known to be entirely and completely true – it is known beyond the ordinary thinking mind and carries a different kind of authority.

For example, one comes across people who describe having been ‘called to a vocation’. More often than not, the ‘call’ comes unexpectedly and is not contrived by the will of the so-called individual. It might be in response to something apprehended or appreciated in a particular moment or it could be entirely unrelated to the circumstances in which the person finds himself. However, something arises intuitively which carries a message, a powerful ‘knowing’ of that which has to be undertaken. The impulse is usually in a spirit of service to a need; it has the power within it to inspire sacrifice, devotion and courage. Although this impulse is felt through ‘the person’ it is recognised that there is nothing limited or personal about it. It has arisen from a universal source, from the ‘spirit of Man’ which is designed to care for the universe in which he finds himself. When a human being lives in accord with this spirit of service, he finds himself and gains fulfilment. This is the intelligence or knowledge of God which speaks through nature. In a more general context, it is why young people are always so ready to respond to a need; they are naturally empathetic and willing to labour and sacrifice for the wellbeing of others. If, as teachers or parents, we fail to appeal to this spirit, we deprive them of the opportunity to realise ultimate satisfaction and emancipation as human beings. We all know that the power available to us when we engage in action for our own benefit alone is small, but when our action is lit by a genuine spirit of service we ‘can move mountains’. Our happiness and development grow as the measure of our giving increases. If we want our sons and daughters to discover their real potential we must provide them with the means to grow their talents and encourage them in the knowledge that what they have to give is truly valuable.

So, at this point in our considerations, I would like first to examine further the principle that there is a wisdom ‘rooted in our human condition’ which indicates the natural way for the human being to realise a measure of well-being and harmony, both individually and in relation to the world in which he lives. Secondly, I will examine the proposition that we can gain access to this innate wisdom which resides within our nature through not only studying the wisdom in our philosophical traditions coming to us from ‘without’, but also through developing the power of reflection which reveals wisdom from within – otherwise known as ‘insight’ or listening to the ‘voice of the soul’.

The Prince of Wales explains further:

“...so much of the wisdom I am referring to came to humanity from revelation. Revelation is not deemed possible from an empirical point of view. It comes about when a person practises great humility and achieves a mastery over the ego so that ‘the knower and the known’ effectively become one. And from this union flows an understanding of the ‘mind of God’.” (p.13)

It would seem that we have lost sight of the fact that our well-being, individually and collectively, depends upon wisdom. As the Prince of Wales describes:

“The high points of human civilization have all been framed and shaped by what I have come to see as ‘shared insight’. These insights belong to humanity as a whole. They are not the preserve of one tradition or one school of thought, nor do they come from a particular moment in time. They are timeless and universal and the wisdom they convey is embedded in all of the world’s great sacred art and architecture. ... I happen to believe that these insights are tremendously important to humanity, but my contention here is that our modern approach has lost sight of them, and in so doing the Westernized view that now dominates so much of the world has become disconnected from its important anchors.”

In seeking to understand more about the principle that there is a natural wisdom ‘rooted in our human condition’, written into our natures, which is designed to secure a measure of well-being, we could look at an immediate example.

More than a quarter of girls today lose their virginity before they are sixteen and by seventeen many will have had three or four full sexual encounters. When La Trobe University in Melbourne conducted a large-scale survey of teenage sexuality, it revealed that between 2002 and 2008 the percentage of girls who had had sex with multiple partners whilst still at school had doubled. Incidents of sexually transmitted diseases are soaring: in 2011 there was an increase of 186,000 new cases of chlamydia; sex is regarded in a far more casual and flippant light than former generations. In the hope of driving down continually escalating pregnancy rates amongst under 18 year old girls, it is common practice for school nurses to issue contraceptives of all types to girls under the legal age of consent and without parental knowledge. Girls as young as 14 are regularly encouraged to take contraceptives from school nurses even before they are considering having sex. The idea is a government objective aimed at achieving a reduction in the alarmingly high pregnancy rates amongst young girls. However, as far as the young girl is concerned this gives her a ‘green light’ to go ahead: it tells her that the school expects that girls of her age would be having sex and that it is fine to do so. This is a prime example of ‘fixing’ the effects rather than seeking to discover the laws of human nature and educate accordingly.

According to Steve Biddulph, author of the recently published *Raising Girls*, girls have never been so insecure. As we know, levels of anxiety amongst young women are rising at an alarming rate: never before has there been such an emphasis on a girl’s physical appearance and neither has her value as an individual ever been so dependent upon her sexual appeal, even from a young age. This problem is starting in primary schools. As one school girl was quoted as saying: ‘At school we’re told about the mechanics of sex. We learn about sex on the internet, but what girls my age are not taught is how to value ourselves or how to make boys value us.’ She might have added that neither does anyone teach young people how to form and maintain meaningful and loving relationships. Furthermore, no one speaks about the relevance of virginity, the value of marriage, the importance of family life or how to prepare for the responsibilities of parenthood. Indeed no one explains to boys how to understand and care for a girl or vice versa: many of us here might have valued a little help and perhaps we still might! But let’s take a step back and see what nature is really saying to her.

What does the voice of her soul say to her? What does her heart yearn for? A primary desire in the nature of a girl is to love and to be loved. She is seeking to form an emotionally intimate relationship from a very early age. Her heart is full of love and the natural desire propelling her from within is to devote that love to another. Once she enters the larger society of a school her search for relationship starts. Parents will hear volumes about her ‘pangs of love’ as she attempts to make close friendships and suffers the slings and arrows of painful rejection every day as she returns from school. Indeed they may well hear more about this than about her formal education! Then as she approaches her teenage years, the relationship she seeks will take a more adult turn in direction. Nevertheless, the desire remains the same: nature is propelling her to seek an object for her devotion which will allow her to pour forth her love, limitlessly. The emotional power and intensity which her heart experiences in this realm is great. The love which inhabits every woman’s heart is seeking expression. The heart is powerful and yet tender by nature: it is easily hurt, particularly by rejection. Her vulnerability is that she desperately wants to be loved and ultimately this may well be her downfall. If the desire to love and be loved is not properly guided by wisdom and good counsel, it runs amok.

It would not be difficult to explain all of this to girls before they are thrown into confusion. We could help them to recognise that nature often indicates its intelligence by providing us with a kind of ‘instinct’. If this is not explained, it is only too easy to miss what it is saying to us. For example, every girl or woman will recognise the fact that there is an innate reluctance to give her virginity away; something from within is indicating that it is not a casual matter – it is a very important step. This is because when she gives her body to a man for the first time, she is also giving him her heart: her physical and emotional realms are entirely intertwined. If she is to avoid the emotional pain of rejection and the hardening effect this has upon her heart, she needs to give herself to a stable and committed relationship and to a man who recognises the responsibility involved in receiving such devotion. This is how her heart might be protected from harm. However, we have forgotten all this which shows how far we have lost touch with the wisdom of generations.

Due to the absence of any wisdom which explains to girls what nature is really seeking and how it might best be found, girls are losing touch with themselves. (And one might add, of course, so are boys, but that is another subject). The outcome is confusion, emotional distress and moral chaos, not only for themselves but also for the society in which they will live. Humanity depends upon women for its emotional welfare.

This is merely one example of how nature provides its own knowledge for the realisation of a measure of well-being, individually and universally. It prompts us from within, indicating its will. However, we may need the help of our wisdom traditions to help us recognise what it is saying. Due to our predominantly materialistic outlook on everything and our tendency to ignore the relevance of intuition or insight in favour of the rational aspect of our faculties, we have lost touch with the ‘inner tutor’ as the Prince of Wales so beautifully describes it:

“...we are no longer able to view the world much beyond its surface and its appearance. We are persuaded, instead, to follow a way of being that denies the non-material side to our humanity even though, contrary to what is supposed to be a growing popular belief, this

other half of ourselves is actually just as important as our rational side, if not more so. It is our means of relating to the rest of the natural world and this is why I have long felt so alarmed that our collective thinking and predominant way of doing things are so dangerously out of balance with Nature. We have come to function with a one-sided, materialistic approach that is defined not by its inclusiveness, but by its dismissal of those things that cannot be measured in material terms.

“...The way in which this has happened has a lot to do with the numbing of our vital inborn or ‘inner tutor’, the so-called human ‘intuition’. Our intuition is deeply rooted in the natural order. It is ‘the sacred gift’, as Einstein called it. Many sacred traditions refer to it as the voice of the soul: the link between the body and mind and therefore the link between the particular and the universal.” (p.11-12)

If we would like to encourage in the next generation the presence of those virtues which we deem to be the best of our humanity, we will need to enrich their minds and hearts with the wisdom with which our spiritual traditions are so abundantly endowed. The effect of this is to draw out of human nature the expression of those qualities upon which a civilized society entirely depends: love, compassion, forgiveness, fortitude, patience, restraint and humility – to name but a few. This enrichment ‘waters the soul’ thereby creating a sensitivity to the voice of the inner tutor. When all is said and done, our lives are shaped by our understanding: the decisions we make, for better or for worse, are informed by the quality of our discernment and that is dependent upon wisdom. The growth of stability, integrity and sagacity in our young people is essential to responsible adulthood and socially-aware citizenship.

The bombardment of information to which young people’s minds are subjected is relentless. Their brains are hard-wired to engage at speed with words and images on a touch and go basis. Reflective assimilation or penetration of ideas, images, or words is becoming foreign to their experience and peaceful silence is virtually unknown. Insomnia is a common problem for the young and this is not surprising given that the surface of the mind is kept at such a heightened and sustained level of stimulation. However, an equally serious consequence of this superficial mental content is the loss of the ability to communicate in a real and satisfying manner. Communication rests upon the ability to receive another into the quiet of one’s heart and there to give complete attention. Only in this way can communion be found and, after all, it is this experience of unity which everyone is searching for in the world of relationships.

So, we need to teach our young people the value of simple stillness: an inner quiet which enables them to be simply present and receptive. Without this capacity we lose touch with what is actually there and live in a grey world of shadows in the mind; these shadows consist of the residue of past impressions mixed with the imaginings of what is not. It is the fertile ground for all kinds of mental and emotional complexity and its related suffering. Meditative and contemplative practices assist in the development of this ability simply to be: this is a freedom indeed and a source of great strength and nourishment to the spirit. Through it, a person’s insight might open up and reveal real understanding which is ultimately beyond the confines of the thinking mind.

I have been privileged to hear accounts from our young people of moments of insight which have transformed their lives. It only takes a glimpse: and what is seen is always both profound and beautifully simple.

On a recent Community Service trip to Calcutta in aid of a charity which the school is supporting, a young woman from the Sixth Form had a life-transforming experience. She explained how she had always been fearful of death and its inconceivable finality. Furthermore, she had never seen a dead body. In Calcutta death was regarded 'an everyday matter'. She saw numerous funeral pyres in and amongst the bustle of daily life. On one occasion she observed a funeral in progress and noted with surprise that no one was in 'mourning'. Indeed, there was equanimity, even a touch of happiness evident in the disposition of the relatives. Suddenly, she saw things very differently. She caught a glimpse of the perfection of the cycle of life and realised that the tendency to see birth and death as concrete events was erroneous. Birth and death were not a beginning and an end: rather there was a single flow of life – a cycle – and it was perfect. There was no 'good' or 'bad' in any of it. This realisation was instantaneous and delivered a sense of happiness and contentment which she had never known before. She explained that her view of life had completely changed.

The famous writer and poet Kathleen Raine described her insight as a very young child in her autobiography:

"Flowers. The pink aromatic clusters of the flowering currant bush hung over my pram. I looked up at those flowers with their minute perfect forms, their secret centres, with the delight of rapt knowledge. They were themselves that knowledge. Not discovery but recognition; recollection; not as memory brings the past to the present but as something for ever present coming to itself. In the manifold, the innumerable I AM each flower was its own I am. A bush burning green and rose in the light of day. There were other flowers; chickweed's slender chalices did not then seem small or insignificant, but filled my beholding as full as a rose window in a cathedral, in all their minute perfection of beautiful form... I lived in a world of flowers, minute but inexhaustible; the wild fragrance of thyme on the moor outside my grand-father's stone garden wall filled me to the brim with itself; it was the moor and the light high air and the thrilling bird-voice on the moor. In the shade of the north wall there was a bed of mint and cool pansies I was allowed to pick; and these flower-faces looked at me, each and every one greeted me in a here and now that had no beginning and no end. All were mine, whatever I saw was mine in the very act of seeing. To see was to know, to enter into total relationship with, to participate in the essential being of each I am. Strange and mysterious some seemed; the little grey-dusted lichen-cups on my grandfather's stone wall, some with what seemed like scarlet eggs in a nest; jagged forms, without a predictable pattern, never twice the same; and yet their beauty was, again, distinctly intelligible to me, was knowledge of essential meaning which, in living form, states itself more perfectly than any words can name it. The forms of nature mean what they are, are what they mean, endlessly and for ever, and their meanings are the ever-varying expression of the one life. The language of Eden— do we share it in some measure with the animals and birds and all the conscious creatures of the earth? – may be forgotten, but it is not to be learned: it is innate

knowledge, and each recognition is like a remembrance of something for ever known.” (p. 1-2)

Ultimately, it is the function of humanity to care for the earth upon which it dwells and all the creatures which inhabit it. To understand the world around us and how to care for it, we have to meet it with what Kathleen Raine described as the ‘eye of the heart’. As the Prince of Wales puts it: *“It is the eye of the heart that penetrates the outer reality of all things to enable us to see their inward reality...ultimate truth at the heart of life does not change. There may be many thousands of pilgrims, but there is one truth and it sits at the centre of things.” (p. 310-311)*

At the centre of the human heart, nature has placed a desire to care for the creation in which we are placed. There is, in each of us, a desire to work for the welfare of another and to give of our love. It is obvious that when this happens, everything prospers. In caring for the development of our young people, we need to speak to this desire which already dwells in their hearts. In this way, they find the will to work hard, overcoming obstacles with a power of fortitude which is always the fruit of a large vision or purpose. As they work, they grow in capacity; as they grow in capacity they grow in stature. Through this, self-esteem naturally flourishes and happiness increases. This is the beauty of the human spirit whose happiness grows in proportion to the measure of love which is given. As we live in accordance with the law of our own nature, the human birthright is realised and we come to know what it is to live in harmony, fulfilment and freedom.

As parents and teachers, we only have to allow nature to work as it will, feeding the universal powers and qualities of our humanity with love and wisdom whilst allowing each individual to discover its own particular way. Thus, as Kathleen Raine put it, we come to the *“recognition and remembrance of something forever known.”*

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