

# **THE SEVERN FORUM**

***'Relationships at the Heart of Learning'***

**by**

**Professor Bart McGettrick**

*Dean of Education, Liverpool Hope University*

**The Roy Niblett Lecture 2014**

**Wednesday 15<sup>th</sup> October**

**University of Gloucestershire, Park campus, Cheltenham**

It is a great honour to be in a position to give the Roy Niblett Lecture this year.

I had the privilege of meeting Roy Niblett with a friend, Dr Neil Hawkes, some time before Roy died. I visited him in his house and found the experience very uplifting. Little could I have imagined that some 20 years later I would have the privilege of recognising this giant of education through what humble words and thoughts I have to offer this evening.

Tonight's theme is RELATIONSHIPS AT THE HEART OF LEARNING, and this is, I think how Roy saw education. He was a great networker, a person who believed that bringing people together was, if not the essence of effective education, it was an important first step. This was a profoundly Christian way of thinking about education, placing the human being firmly at the heart of what we are about in education.

Roy Niblett was a man who eloquently and courageously created a rich tapestry of both ideas in education and of theology. Neither time nor wisdom will conclude the discussion about how these interact, and it is encouraging to see study groups from The Severn Forum constantly wrestle with these ideas and opportunities. I suppose I have come to a view that the educational process largely takes place in that human interaction. The past has given attention, perhaps even too much attention, to the 'content' of education. More attention is needed to be given to the 'how' and the 'why' of education.

Experience suggests to me that the educated person has three main attributes, hope, justice and love. Little else matters. When we ask the question, 'Who is the most educated person you know?' I trust we do not immediately transpose this to mean, who has the most qualifications? The most educated are people of wisdom rather than knowledge; of service and generosity of spirit rather than seeking personal aggrandisement; people for others rather than the self. Of course we might also look for open-mindedness and being open to constant change.

It is striking that these aspects of education lie incarnated in the person. Education is always found in the person. It is not some kind of cognitive gymnastics that educates us. It is the lived experience of transforming the world to be a better place. None of this can be taught didactically. It is taught through relationships, and the formation of the learner in terms of their values.

One might recognise that the description of an educated person - a person inspired by justice, hope and love – is perilously close to someone who has internalised what is often referred to as ‘the Gospel values’ – Faith, Hope and Love.

These form the foundations of the educated person. It is noteworthy that these aspects of education cannot be taught didactically. They are not to be ‘transmitted’ in any real sense. They are formed in the person through the relationships that we develop.

It is also important to consider that they are also not readily measurable. Certainly we might find surrogate measures, but these would be indirect. So much of what counts in education is what can be measured. That is to place accountability before our conviction for a deep education.

One of the most difficult questions which I have been faced with in the field of education is, ‘How do we educate people in Faith?’ My response is always, ‘With humility.’ Faith is a gift, and we should not presume we have much influence over the faith of others. However, when I look at ways of forming people of faith, we do it by putting people in communities of faith. It develops from the relationships that are formed. This is why our Christian schools are vital; and it is also why we should do all we can to support adult formation at parish level. The Severn Forum is strategically well placed to support, advise and guide parishes and Christian groups in this area.

I am currently spending a great deal of time working with Bethlehem University. I spent some weeks there in September and it convinces me that the only route to peace in our world is through education. That is, an education where relationships are at the heart. We need to educate people to understand that. We live in a society and at times when governments seem to want the simplification of apparent certainty. The world is a most uncertain place and we need to educate with that in mind.

I am tempted to digress for just a moment to reflect on those dark days in Jordan and Palestine... with the sun burning the roads and deserts, but sad darkness over the people. To travel to the borders of Syria and Iraq and smell the bombs as well as hear them in the distance; to watch with horror the children streaming behind their parents on the roads south to escape from the militia and mayhem of inhuman acts of terror; to see the broken families and the broken hearts ... This is when you know the only future for our world is in a educated population. That is when we can look at the other and try to see goodness in them; and when

we look at ourselves we dare to see what more we can do. That is when we can see that right relationships lie at the heart of humanity.

Yes, in Bethlehem, still there are the gunshots at Rachel's Tomb most evenings; the taking of Palestinian land for building Israeli settlements each day; the fear and broken people who will not see peace in our lifetime. What hope do they have?

Yes there are photographs of children's cots on top of the rubble of demolished hospitals in Gaza (but we won't see these photographs because of the control of the media) ; there are schools used as safe havens for over 1000 people – women and children inside and men outside... and then demolished by bombs.

When you see this; when you smell it; when there is still an acrid taste in your throat, you cannot believe we have educated enough people to make a better world. You and I have a lot more to do.

One of the key principles of educating people is to begin from where they are at. In Bethlehem I have learned very clearly that we should not do things FOR the Palestinians, but we should do things WITH them. This is a principle based on relationships. We are not to create a culture of dependency, but a culture of mutual respect. We do not gain much by telling people of a different culture, who know local circumstances so much better, and telling them what they ought to do. We should always be humble enough to walk in the shoes of others, and learn through the soles of our feet.

So when I am trying to develop leadership in the 5 Christian schools of Gaza, I won't do this on my own, but with Palestinians. It requires relationships. You might simply say that on this journey of education the footsteps are more important than the signposts.

We need to walk with two steady feet, one in the here and now; and one in the hereafter. There is more to this world than can be seen day to day. There is a world of mythical interest that we ought not to ignore. Our imagination, our spirit needs education as much as our rational selves.

It is like a bird. If we wish to fly we need two wings, one is the rational and the other is the spiritual. We need to use both if we are to soar and see the world as it really is. What is also important about this metaphor, is that if we did not have one, we would be as well not having

the other. So the educated person has an all-round education, and not simply driven by the demands of the world of accountability.

The iron cage of accountability needs to give way to a legacy of humanity. We cannot be bystanders looking with despair on a world which is driven by measured outcomes alone, and has consigned to a secondary place the deep values and ideals which derive from justice, hope and love.

Hope is not just some vague set of aspirations, it is central to our living... Let me give the example of life expectancy in Glasgow. In the west end of Glasgow, the more affluent side, life expectancy for men is about 86 year). In the east side of the city it is about 68 years. The reason for the difference is not just smoking, drinking, domestic violence, etc. It is a lack of hope.

Hope requires us to have meaning in life. There can be no time in human history when there is greater need to think about education in the round – the student with access to as many facts and more information than the teacher; and the teacher with pressing public accountability to educate the students; government and society with such high expectations of the formal education system; and increased variety in the ways in which education has become available. The role of the teacher must be to inspire, to excite and to see the flourishing of each student. Yet in a society in which education is a public service there is a danger of this being reduced to someone who ‘delivers the curriculum’ or who is compliant with government or an equivalent agency in providing a prescribed body of knowledge, skills and ideas to the next generation. This would be to reduce education to some form of transmission of information, skills and the ideas of others. Education is essentially ‘the practice of freedom’ (Freire) and is devoted to bringing liberty and wholeness to each person. It is centrally concerned with justice, hope and love.

In contemporary society the main purpose of education could be expressed as *the flourishing of humanity*. That, I believe, is what Viktor Frankl was saying so much more eloquently in his comment, ‘The salvation of man is through love and in love.’

When speaking of the flourishing of humanity it includes personal and social well-being, as well as attainment and achievement. Education is concerned with the stewardship of an ever-changing culture, with learning and thinking being driven by a concern for the dignity of each human being. It helps us to be more suited for life, and always has a moral good in its

intentions, aiming at helping society to thrive and culture to improve. So education is always seeking ‘a right ethic’ encapsulated in the relationships that are created in and for the flourishing of humanity. Education, like faith, is always incarnated in a person. It does not reside on paper or in documents; it is always in a person. For many teachers that is difficult since they see themselves as being accountable for ‘results’ – however these are judged. Firstly, teachers as professional people are responsible, and within that professional responsibility they are accountable.

Education is about making a better world, about improvement, and about human progress. In every education system there is a set of values which guide and direct policies, processes and action. At different times and in different places the emphases on these values will differ. Governments, professions, organisations and individual people are each likely to have a view of what the purposes are. These may differ and they may even conflict. So it is possible, for example, for a government to fund education because it sees that it is crucial for the national economy; whereas an institution may see its role as promoting skills and understanding through music or the arts. An individual in that institution may consider their interest as largely about satisfying a more personal interest in developing values or in creativity. It may reasonably be concluded that there is not one single set of purposes for education, but a multitude of overlapping and interlocking purposes. To seek a single statement that encapsulates all of these is not particularly useful, although all may be consistently seeking the betterment of the human condition in whatever form that takes.

Educated people, the teacher, the student, the parent and the wider public, are constantly reading, and even writing, the signs of the times and contributing to improving society. Within the classroom constant reflection by the teacher should ensure that they pay attention to the needs of those for whom they have a professional responsibility, and in their turn they will educate their teachers. These are not achieved through hard-wired channels of transmission. Within that classroom everyone continues to evolve and develop as part of a community. In the wider world the number of players that shape society means that normally no one force is dominant, but all make their own contribution to shape and guide society. In this way society ‘emerges.’ At its best this is a mutually rewarding process based on interaction and dealing with deep human values and emotions. The ambition is always to form people and communities both of distinction and of humility, in whatever contexts these attributes are to be exercised. These are not static attributes or qualities, but rather part of a dynamic that inspires communities and societies in different ways at different times. There is

a kind of plasticity of human and social development in which communities shape and re-shape themselves as they evolve and develop. Within this the education process is almost like a catalyst in that fluid evolution. Its function is to be that change agent, made manifest in a better world.

So education, if it is to lead to the flourishing of humanity, is not some remote, difficult and draining intellectual exercise of memory or cognitive gymnastics. For some that may form part of what it is to be educated, but it is a means to be educated. We need to form relationships that make us more fully alive, more fully engaged in our various communities. It would be a travesty of the idea of education if it was to be reduced to memorisation of only mathematical theorems, or knowing capital cities, or reciting irregular verbs, and so on. These, generally speaking, are not what keep us ‘alive’ ... though, of course, for some people they have their place.

Asserting with conviction that education is concerned with the flourishing of humanity all sounds eminently plausible. Yet is that what the contemporary world believes? This may be such an idealistic aspiration of education that one might wonder if education can any longer sustain such a vision or ambition? Has this vision become simply a hallucination in the face of the forces of commercialism and economism? Have the last decades of the twentieth century brought such universal social change that education itself has become a commodity to be divided up into chunks (often called ‘modules’ or ‘credits’) and made available to those who wish to buy them, or who can afford to do so? Have even the most dedicated of systems and institutions set their sights on this kind of education – then seeking increasing performance as the way it is to be measured? Often it is only really measuring the speed of learning or some vague concept of the amount of learning. Is that what quality of thinking is really about? Has measured data become the only legitimate or acceptable evidence in our contemporary culture?

Education is not essentially a process of transmitting of facts or skills or ideas, but is a process that leads to a better society, a society of people who care for each other and who consider ‘the other’ before the self. Education is not directed at forming people of compliance, conformity or who are parasitic on the thinking of others. There is a world of a difference between being well informed and well educated.

In times of accelerating and even exponential change we need to look for deeper ways of educating, and deeper structures that will lead to sustainable learning and thinking – and

improving the world. Change is often most clearly seen in the superficial parts of society, and we need to try also to understand what is happening deep in ourselves and in our souls, and in society. There is a connectedness between the outside world of change and what happens in our deepest thoughts and feelings. Perhaps what is happening within us may not be subject to such dramatic change, but when it does happen it is often more profound and more lasting. When we feel the external world is changing and we are not, there is a tension and stresses form. It is in our nature to change and to change often. Teachers need to pay attention to the depth of human need and human feelings. Their actions will take account of how they see the world in terms of stability and change. Their actions will be focused on how they see their roles as professional people, hopefully not constrained as ‘operatives to advance government policies,’ but as autonomous professionals with vision formed through knowing what is best for those in whose interests they exercise their professional responsibilities. Of course, within that, they may well be pursuing government policies.

In the early decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the global changes driven by politics and religion certainly pose challenges for the educator. These challenges are both at macro and micro levels. As we live through rapidly changing times it can be difficult to understand the extent of the threat of new forces and new pressures; equally the ever-expanding access to the realities of other countries and other cultures seem to press us to be more rooted in our own social and cultural environment. The more we become global, the more we also become local.

So we sit here in Cheltenham, and think globally. Think that there is a relationship with that child tonight in Gaza or Marfaq who has no roof, no means of knowing what tomorrow will bring... but in whom we can have hope if we develop the right relationships. Roy Niblett would wish that of us.