

Feathers blown in the wind: good teaching, good news and religious education

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An anecdote is a short narrative of an incident of private life (Newnes 1952). This article is anecdotal. It relies on several short narratives. It is my informal account of how I have arrived at some conclusions about Religious Education over forty years as a religious educator. But it is not private. The anecdotes are about evangelization which is never private. The point of evangelization is to affect people with good news, having first been affected by it yourself: whether it is good news about football or about the meaning of life.

Evangelization in the Christian sense is about the good news of salvation. It is also about the hope there is in the universe, the cautiously optimistic view Catholics have of human life. Salvation is the assurance we have that the hope and cautious optimism are securely founded on texts, and in the life of the believing community.

I began teaching religion in 1964. My favourite text on religious education is *The Renewal of the Education of Faith*. It was published in 1970 just as I was becoming aware of what Vatican II meant for religious education and it gave me my favourite definition in religious education, 'Evangelization strictly speaking is that first announcement of salvation to someone who, for various reasons, has no knowledge of it, or does not yet believe in it'. It goes on to say that the ministry of evangelization is essential in the Church, not only for non-Christian peoples but also for believers. As I have come back to the *REF* time and again since I realised that *for me* religious education is always about the assurance we have that our hope and cautious optimism are securely founded.

In 1978-79 I studied at the University of Lancaster and came to understand what Religious Studies is and became more convinced that when I am involved in religious education I am involved in reassurance of myself, even when I am

empathizing with Buddhism, Judaism, or with any other religious position.

Ninian Smart based his approach to the study of religions on 'empathy'. He talks of '*epoche*', 'a bracketing out of one's feelings and assumptions about the phenomenon at hand' (Smart 1998). But I do not keep my feelings bracketed out. I am forever asking of all phenomena, 'Is this good news for me?' Smart talks of a 'warm neutralism'. I cannot be neutral. While the 'warm' is not a problem, I take sides. I am looking for good news. All my teaching is about me being affected by good news and then trying to pass it on.

Good news is that which enlightens my life, that which sets me free. If what I am doing is not good news I am not interested. I am claiming that despite the arguments about what Religious Education is or is not, all good teaching has to be good news. Life is too short to study phenomena that do not *engage* me.

Seeking to be engaged I found that 'good news' is more diverse than I originally thought or was taught, and so is salvation. Salvation according to my dictionary is 'the act of saving: means of preservation from any serious evil; (*theol*) the saving of man (sic) from the power and penalty of sin, the conferring of eternal happiness' (Newnes 1952). But I have learnt that the main message of salvation is that God loves me unconditionally and nothing I do will alter that.

For me as a Christian the Incarnation is the main sign of this. It is the most important thing I have ever heard. Other really important messages I have heard are that there is hope. And 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength, and with your entire mind: and your neighbour as yourself' (Luke 10:27). Messages such as these save me.

But I hear good news not only in religion. Poetry, art, films, the love of others, good teaching, good books; all of these are places of good news. I have also learnt that before I can teach any of this as good news, I need to experience my desperate need for good news. This desperation reminds me that I cannot feel happy unless I acknowledge my sadness.

I claim this applies to all good teachers of anything: unless you are touched first, unless you experience the need to have good news, and have experienced good news you cannot teach in any meaningful way.

I teach undergraduate and graduate teachers preparing to teach Religious Education. Recently I watched a group of my students present a class on how they would teach a lesson on Moses and the Exodus. In my critique of the lesson I pointed out that the Christian interpretation of *Exodus* contains so much that is essential to understanding human experience; particularly it is about the metaphor of exile. Some of the class assured me they had not experienced exile so I had them think about alienation. I asked students to tell me of their feelings of alienation. One told us of feeling alienated in the Religious Education curriculum class. I asked her to tell us about this. She admitted that though she was studying Religious Education Curriculum she was not religious and she knew little about religion. When the knowledgeable in the class talked about religion she felt excluded. I was aware, then, that *Exodus* could help her more than students who claimed to feel no alienation at all. *Exodus*, the psalms and most of the Bible make the case that we are all exiles but we are not to give up hope.

St Augustine's feeling expressed in, 'Our hearts are restless and never will we rest until we rest in you' comes straight out of *Exodus*, the Jews sitting weeping by the waters of Babylon and the young woman in my class who doesn't know what is going on are all talking of the feeling of being an exile. Having acknowledged their alienation there is a chance, that when the good news is announced they will know their need to hear it. One question for me as a teacher is, where do I start to help my students hear the good news?

The Renewal of the Education of Faith was not the first book of good news that I read. When I was a child I read many stories: the *William* books, most of Biggles, war stories by authors such as Paul Brickhill, lots of 'cowboy and indian' yarns, the

Don Camillo books; and myriad stories of saints. I came from a Catholic family where books and learning were valued but no one at home or at my school had any idea of what books were really worth reading so I didn't read *Winnie the Pooh* and other children's classics until I was an adult. I read what I could find. My favourite saints' stories from early on were Miguel Pro, Vincent De Paul, Damian of Molokai, and the missionaries who went to China. Another was Saint Philip Neri though I think I was fifteen before I heard of him.

Neri was a Roman priest who lived from 1515 to 1595, who had a great gift for spiritual direction, and a well developed sense of the ridiculous. Once a lady came to him for confession and accused herself of being a gossip. 'Go down to the market and buy a chook that has been killed but still has its feathers on,' he told her, 'and walk all around Rome plucking it until there are no feathers left. Then come back here'. She thought it was a silly thing to do but after all it was Father Philip and he was supposed to be wise. So she did it and came back. 'What now Father?' she asked. 'Go back the way you have come and collect every feather,' he said. 'That is impossible Father Philip. It is a windy day. By now the feathers are everywhere.' 'Like your gossip,' he chided her, 'and you cannot get any of it back.'

When I was fifteen I changed schools and met Brother Athanasius McGlade. He taught me Leaving Certificate English. McGlade taught everything in an exciting way. It was all obviously important to him. He encouraged us to read widely and suggested books we might read and music we might listen to. *Come Rack, Come Rope* by Robert Hugh Benson was one book. It was a religious potboiler, an exciting and blood thirsty account of some of the English martyrs in Tudor England. But McGlade knew that pot boilers have their place because they can lead the interested student to go further. First you read Benson, then other books on the period, then catch on that if you follow the references and the footnotes to what your authors have been reading you quickly know a lot about the subject and you start reading the sources and the classics. Soon you are part of the tradition.

In teachers' college I met another man who encouraged me to read widely though he was less into potboilers. Brother Columba Davy gave us a reading list; *Voss*, *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *The Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, *The Plough and the Stars*, *De Catechezandibus Rudibus*, *The Playboy of the Western World*, *Decline and Fall*,

Travels with My Aunt and other books. I devoured them and I have read *Decline and Fall* regularly since when I need to laugh at teaching, teachers, or educational administrators generally.

When I was eleven, Brother Seery had taught us some poems. He began with Tennyson's *The Brook*; 'I come from haunt of coot and hern, I make a sudden sally,' it begins. I did not know what this meant and nothing he said helped me imagine it. There had been a Sally when we were still in year two at the convent school but it seemed to have nothing to do with her. Brother said a brook was like a creek but Tennyson's brook bore no resemblance to the Burringong Creek at the bottom of our street. So I decided poetry was out of my reach.

Brother Davy though read us poetry from everywhere. He wanted us to be educated in the classics but started with classics I could cope with. *Naming of Parts*, *Summer is icumen in*, bits of Chaucer, Mallory, Wordsworth, Hopkins, Eliot; Tennyson too, but this time *Ulysses*. He didn't take the poems apart or expect us to learn them off by heart, though I did learn things I wanted to know. He just taught me how to read poetry and helped me love poems.

When I was a young teacher various educational experts taught that comics were dangerous for children's reading and that ball point pens would ruin children's handwriting. My instinct was that they were wrong on both counts. I decided to follow both McGlade and Davy. If potboilers and comics led children to the classics as they did in my case then I would use whatever it took. A student brought Spike Milligan's *Book of Milliganimals* to school and I liked it so I used it in poetry classes. I hadn't heard of Milligan until then. As a child I had lived in a country town and hadn't heard of the Goons. It was hard to pick up ABC radio for a start and even if it had been easy it was outside our cultural range. Just after discovering Milligan I found James Thurber's *The Wonderful O* in a local bookshop. Soon I came upon Roger McGough, another Christian Brothers' boy though this time from Liverpool in the UK who wrote poems for children that were at once really good and accessible, poems that extended children and invited them to go wider and deeper.

Lately people have been talking about the role of popular culture in education. It is also commonly said that we are in a post-modern age and that one of the signs of post-modernism is that there is no

meta-narrative. A conclusion that is drawn from these claims by some educators is that there are no classics, that popular culture is as good and as worth studying as the classics. Some suggest we do not need to study the classics at all. Mickey Mouse is easier to read than *Our Mutual Friend* so we will study Mickey Mouse and Dickens can be neglected. Those who want to neglect Dickens have no friend in me.

I want my students to read as much Dickens as possible, and John Donne and Chaucer; indeed all the classics if they have the inclination and the ability. They have the right to be able to enjoy Hopkins, Keats, Newman, Austen, Proust and all the great writers. I have been where there are few good books and almost no good music and it is a desolate place. I am claiming, however that popular culture has a role to play in religious education because it is where the people are and, like the potboilers of my youth, it can lead people into the tradition. And some examples of present popular culture will be among the classics eventually. Cervantes' *Don Quixote* was a potboiler when it was written. And so was the *Book of Jonah*.

In Moliere's play *The Bourgeois Gentleman* Monsieur Jourdain discovers that he has 'been speaking prose all my life, and didn't even know it!' Like Monsieur Jourdain I have been using popular culture in religious education all my teaching life and I didn't even know it. When I began using popular culture in religious education it was just trusting my own instincts and taking Athanasius McGlade seriously. 'If he is reading only Robert Hugh Benson it is better than not reading at all'. Benson made me interested in Thomas More. I found *Utopia* because I found Thomas More in a potboiler. That is part of what this article is about; the role of popular culture in religious education.

It is also an article about fools. The French priest-thinker Michel de Certeau describes the mystical as 'a reaction against the appropriation of truth by the clerics.' The mystical, he said 'favours the illuminations of the illiterate, the experience of women, the wisdom of fools, the silence of the child' (in Harris 1999). By 'cleric' de Certeau does not mean priests or bishops as such. He means those individuals or groups who presume they have the truth and who try to impose it on everyone else.

He is claiming that every time that happens, in the Church or in the wider society God talks through

an illiterate no one like Bernadette Soubirous, a fool like John Vianney, a whole group of those considered unimportant (women for example), or the silence of children, those pained uncomprehending faces we see almost nightly on television from Iraq, or the refugee detention centres in Australia.

Fools, illiterates and children have a close association with popular culture. Fools often are sources of good news. On a hill called Guadeloupe just outside Mexico City on December 9, 1531, so the story goes the Virgin Mary appeared to Juan Diego, a Mexican Indian peasant. She asked that a shrine be built there. This request was duly carried out and today it is a place of pilgrimage for hundreds of thousands of people. Some of my students visited it on their way to World Youth Day in Canada in 2002 and were overawed. There is some doubt that Juan Diego ever existed but as he was canonised by Pope John Paul II we can presume there is something in this story even if it is not all historically verifiable. I read somewhere without noting the source that Our Lady of Guadeloupe really appealed to the Mexicans because she spoke to Juan Diego in the local Indian language, not in Spanish the language of the conquering upper class. She was their Virgin Mary, not the Virgin Mary of those with the property and power.

This has an echo in another apparition of the Virgin. Bernadette Soubirous was also a peasant who said that she had seen the Virgin Mary, this time at Lourdes an out of the way town at the foot of the Pyrenees. Again Mary spoke to the girl not in the classical French of the Paris salons, or even of the flash convents, but in the patois of the illiterate working class shepherdess.

When Bernadette later entered the convent at Nevers at the age of twenty two she found that some of the sisters were jealous of her. These sisters could not understand how Mary would appear to someone who couldn't read or write, or even speak good French when there were all of them there in the convent that could. 'Surely, when the Virgin Mary speaks French she will speak it particularly well to someone who can understand her!' they might have thought, not unreasonably. But she didn't. She spoke patois because Bernadette did and Mary wanted to be understood by her.

Mary met Bernadette where she worked, and talked to her in a language she understood.

Quite a few people over the centuries have claimed to have had visions of the Virgin Mary. Not all of them later became saints even when the Church had accepted that their visions were genuine. Bernadette Soubirous is a saint now, not because of the visions but because of what she did with the rest of her life. This involved putting up with and growing holy among some of the less than saintly sisters she had chosen to live with. Bernadette had learnt somehow a truth summed up a few years after her death by the Scottish Sacred Heart sister Janet Erskine Stewart who lived from 1857 to 1914. She wrote:

As far as we are concerned, God means things to be just as they are, what does happen and what does not happen. So never wish them otherwise by a hair's breadth. All the raw material for sanctity is in the 'now' just as it is, and if it had not the two elements, the one we do not understand, and the one that we would not choose, it would not be what it is.

I cannot find the source of this quote either. Stewart's life and letters were published in a book by Maud Monahan in 1921 and the quote is not there but I am sure it is hers. The point of it is that all the raw material for sanctity is in the 'now' just as it is.

Another quote that complements this is from *The Cloud of Unknowing*:

In the realm of the spirit heaven is as near up as it is down, behind as before, to left or to right. The access to heaven is through desire. Those who long to be there really are there in spirit. The path to heaven is measured by desire not by miles. For this reason St Paul says in one of his epistles, "Although our bodies are presently on earth, our life is in heaven". Other saints have said substantially the same thing but in different ways. They mean that love and desire constitute the life of the spirit. And the spirit abides where its love abides as surely as it abides in the body which it fills with life. Does this make any more sense to you? We need not strain our spirit in all directions to reach heaven, for we dwell there already through love and desire.

The Cloud of Unknowing is a short book written in medieval Britain by an author whose name has long been lost. She or he is claiming that we are in heaven already. If that is right and God is in heaven then God is all about us, now, just as it is.

I have been strongly influenced by the quotes from Janet Erskine Stewart and the anonymous author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, as well as Athanasius McGlade and Columba Davy my two old teachers. If the material for sanctity is in the now and we are in heaven already then God can be found in the ordinariness of the now. In fact God, like the Virgin Mary in Guadeloupe and Lourdes speaks to people in patois. And some of the local patois where I live is the popular culture my students live in.

Part of my work is to teach religious education curriculum to undergraduate and graduate students preparing to teach religion in secondary schools, mostly in Catholic schools though not entirely. For some years in their final religious education curriculum course I set prospective secondary school teachers this assignment:

This task involves you identifying **an experience that has been important in your own spiritual/religious/personal development and reflecting on it**. Use as your focus an experience, a book, poem, work of art, movie, article (or series of articles) which has engendered or supported your personal development. The book, movie, articles, whatever need to have either helped you better understand your experience of life or have opened up a new insight or state of appreciation that has made you see life in a different or changing light.

You are to write a review of your chosen book, movie, articles or whatever commenting on the following aspects:

- a) Why is this text significant for you?
- b) How has this work changed your perception of or enriched your life?
- c) What affect will this have on you as a teacher and how you teach?
- d) How could you use this text or your experience of it effectively in the classroom?

The second part of this assessment task was to have them present this to their tutorial class:

The presentations will be done *individually* and will be no more than 20 minutes in duration. You can use any methods of presentation you choose, for example dance, song, power point, video clip, or interview.

Some of these students talked of specifically religious experiences; going to World Youth Day in Canada or Rome or Germany for instance. One talked of the death of her father and of how the local priest had brought around a statue of the Virgin Mary and said the rosary with the family. It was a traveling statue that he took from home to home as he saw the need. As part of her presentation she had us make a decade of the rosary from beads and fishing line she had brought along and taught the class how to say the decade as we made the little prayer aid.

Another told us of a hike she and her boyfriend had made in the Andes and of how as they helped each other survive the strenuous adventure they gradually built up the kind of trust that has been the basis of their marriage. One student talked of her near death experience when she had fallen victim to a stroke while still at school. At the hospital a doctor taught her to make paper cranes and introduced her to the story of the Japanese girl who tried to make a thousand paper cranes before she died of leukemia after being exposed to the atom bomb at Hiroshima. This doctor taught my student how to find hope while he had her practise her fine motor skills making the cranes and thus helped her regain her health.

Some students used films, others songs. One young woman from Eritrea did a peace dance and told us of her hopes for peace. Several have sung songs from popular culture; one sang a series of songs she had written. Films, videos, and clowning for sick children at Westmead Children's Hospital have also been experiences reflected on. Some who work in the St Vincent De Paul night van or with street kids at Macquarie Fields talked of that and linked their experience with religious education curriculum in ways that suggested they were learning more than one thing at a time.

I too have used film teaching religious education or when trying to understand my own life. Teaching morality for example I have used a clip from that fine 2000 Kenneth Lonergan film with Laura Linney and Mark Ruffalo *You Can Count on Me*. Time and again I have heard an unhelpful or dispiriting homily at Mass on Sunday morning then on the Sunday afternoon seen a film that enriches my spiritual life. The German film *The Lives of Others* is a recent example. The Hilary Swank movie *Freedom Writers* is another. *As it is in Heaven* is a third.

I do not use film just to get my students interested. I introduce them to culture for its own sake because the best of it gives me hope. I start with films, poetry, books and music that help me in my religious life, and then encourage the students to find and be open to what will enrich them.

In 1958 and 1959 the NSW English Syllabus set *The Merchant of Venice* to be studied in year eight and *Henry V* for year nine. *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry V* were in their day both popular and high culture all at once. It depended whether you were standing in the pit or seated on the balcony and probably on whether you were eating oranges or drinking sack as you watched the play. Brother George Barfield our teacher was conscientious about us passing the final exams so he had us learn great slabs of the texts by heart. I can still recite bits of those two plays and they are slightly more important to me than the rest of Shakespeare because I came to them first and they led me into the others.

James McAuley's poem, *One thing at least* says, 'Loving must be learnt by heart/ if it's to be any good.' I use the whole poem often in religious education curriculum lectures. 'Learnt by heart' here means two things. It means what Brother Barfield did with the two Shakespeare plays; he made us recite them out loud until bits stuck in our heads. It also means that loving is a heart thing; it has to do with passion. Loving poetry is just the same as loving a person in this respect. So is, loving God. I can get better by practising; at the same time it is a mystery, an experience beyond rational explanation.

Popular culture is for some of our students their only culture and so it has to be where they find God. God speaks to them where God speaks to any of us, in our context.

There was a poster in the 1970s that read, 'You may be the only book on Jesus Christ that some people ever read.' It is a cliché, but clichés persist because they contain some of the truth. My task as a Catholic teacher is, among other things, to help my students hear God in their 'now', to find Jesus Christ in their reading, and all their experience. And with my student teachers to it is to help them help their students to do the same.

Religious education teaching is primarily enabling others to be who God calls them to be, and to meet God in their lives, because it is the only place God is for us.

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