

## **A Spirituality of Service Learning**

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A key focus for this conference is the growing awareness of the ‘shadow’ side of certain approaches to service learning. As we’ve heard already, culturally insensitive, patronising and effectively *self-serving* programs may have significantly destructive impacts on those communities purportedly being served. A further, and perhaps less discussed, dimension of the shadow that may be cast by service learning is the sometimes debilitating impact on students of being regularly exhorted to ‘make a difference’ and so made to feel individually responsible for the world’s transformation. The spiritual roots of both these pathologies of ‘service’ are I think remarkably similar. If we begin to tease them out, we’re in a better position to conceptualise and develop approaches to service and so to service learning which are more authentically life-giving for all involved.

### **Being Alienated**

I’m going to start by elaborating on what I’ve called the potentially ‘debilitating’ impact of a particular rhetoric of service, by drawing on my own experience. I went to high school at an Anglican girls’ school in Canberra and although in my day the concept of service learning was fairly embryonic, I certainly imbibed the notion that my life, particularly given the privilege of my private school education, should make a difference in the world. And this was what I wanted too – I wanted to serve. Later I won a Rhodes Scholarship to study at Oxford, which continued my formation in this vein, since Rhodes scholars are people (so the brochures go) distinguished by their commitment to public service and the common good.

Now, all this looks and indeed is, in many ways a good thing. It *is* true, and life-giving, to understand my life as indissolubly connected to the well-being of others; it

does infuse my life with meaning and purpose to know that I am both called and equipped to respond to world's need.

And yet, and yet ... there was also something alienating and stultifying in the way I appropriated these seemingly altruistic and benign values, something that took me a long time to work through. In the years after school and university, I often experienced strong feelings of anxiety, inadequacy and guilt. I couldn't bear to read the annual Rhodes Scholars' report because everyone, it seemed, was saving the world – except me, of course. The same went for my Grammar Report. I worked very hard to 'make a difference' through bouts of activism and commitment to worthy causes – Barnardo's kids friends, companionship severely disabled children, campaigning for Amnesty International and working on its national executive, fundraising for homeless children in Iraq. It felt good to be doing these things, to be caring ... and while I was doing them, to feel my guilt alleviated. But at another level, I still never felt I was doing enough, and I remained overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task with the result that these times of well-intentioned activity were generally followed by exhaustion and bouts of burn out. Implicitly, I realise now, I was trying to justify my existence by fixing the world – 'to whom much is given, much is expected', you know the line ... That was me. I had to make a difference, and the more spectacular the better.

Now, perhaps I was just a particularly earnest and angst-ridden young person, who took a long time to find her true vocation! I'm not claiming my experience is normative – though I don't think I'm alone. I share it, for two reasons. First, I think we need to be aware that as taught to and received by students the very rhetoric of service can contribute to their being alienated from themselves and their own deep calling. And relatedly, it can have the effect of alienating and isolating students from the world 'out there', the very world whose needs they're called to engage. Instead

of seeing myself as part of the whole, a member of the family of things, it's as if my privilege and its attendant responsibilities subtly separates me from the mass. At worst this leads to a kind of patronising *noblesse oblige*, the kind of cultural insensitivity and feelings of implicit superiority we've been discussing. For others, or perhaps even simultaneously, it leads to a distorting and debilitating sense of being over responsible, and the anxiety of needing to *do* more, *give* more, *achieve* more, just to be OK.

I know these are dangers many of your service learning programs are aware of. You are working hard to subvert the tacit assumption that service is about helping from the top down, the so-called privileged helping the so-called under-privileged. Many programs emphasise that true service is about working 'with' rather than 'to or for', and that its heart is the experience of mutuality which connects us not only with others but with who we ourselves are. But this can remain simply an abstract, sincerely held value. For it to become real for students, the place from which they *actually* live and serve, requires the cultivation of self-knowledge and authentic humility.

And this gives rise to the questions I want to explore more deeply today. How may students be inducted into an approach to service which reconciles rather than alienates them from themselves and from those they seek to serve? What framework and practices are required if schools are to develop a service learning curriculum that is life-giving for all involved? As we turn to these questions, I want to begin by reflecting in a bit more depth on the qualities of selfhood that are needed for true service.

## Service and the Self

Thomas Merton, a Trappist monk, writer and peace activist, writing in the context of the American civil rights movement in the 1960s, spoke of how the aspiration to serve must be connected to certain necessary qualities of the self.

‘[Anyone]’, he said ‘who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening their own self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others’.<sup>1</sup> No matter how sincere, they will tend to communicate only the ‘contagion’ of their own obsessions, ambitions and anxieties. In other words, whatever our *values* and *intentions*, we’ll not help, we’ll not bring healing or enable justice when we operate from anxiety, rivalry, complacency, self-justification and pride – the same pathologies that cause wounding in the first place.

But what does ‘deepened self-understanding, freedom, integrity and capacity to love’ actually look like? What are the particular qualities or capacities that need to be developed, if we’re to serve in truly healing ways in this world?

I want to highlight three. The first vital capacity is the willingness to ‘be with’ another and to ‘be with’ what is. Educationalist Parker Palmer tells a story of his experience of profound clinical depression during which he suffered greatly from the responses of those who either avoided him altogether or well-intentionedly tried to fix him. One person who *made* a difference was Bill, his friend who found a way to *be with* him, alongside him, in his darkness. Bill would visit to massage Palmer’s feet each afternoon, rarely even speaking. He was simply there – present – neither evasive nor invasive – and that, in time, made the difference.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action* (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1980), p.164.

<sup>2</sup> Parker J. Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), pp.63-64.

Of course, this practice of ‘being with’ doesn’t mean we never seek to change things. But so often, our desire to fix or make things better is actually a form of avoidance. We struggle to be present to the pain of what is; we’re unwilling to be with the discomfort of *our* anxiety, helplessness, or grief. So we rush around trying to cheer people and implement premature solutions, masking our sense of powerlessness with activity. But the truth is we cannot contribute to the healing of people, relationships or the deepest of our world’s wounds unless we are willing first to be with things as they are.

How, for example, can we serve people who are grieving or dying, if we refuse to be with, to let them be with, the pain, anger, emptiness, and awkward questioning that goes with this experience? Tolstoy’s amazing little story, *The Death of Ivan Ilych*, portrays a dying man horribly isolated because those around him won’t acknowledge what’s happening, and won’t let him acknowledge it either.

In our Australian context, we’re slowly realising that true reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples calls, not just for well-intentioned programs, but for our learning how to *be* with one another in unknowing and the pain of continuing irresolution and trauma. When know that when we’ve been badly wronged or hurt, what we crave most is acknowledgement and solidarity – and this kind of attentive presence is healing in itself. Similarly, those most deeply attuned to the suffering of the natural world are recognising this need to be *with* the earth, to hear its cry, if healing at the deepest level is to happen. I have friends who have a disciplined daily practice of standing at the ocean’s edge, letting themselves be present to the sea and their painful knowledge of its suffering. They will not evade this difficult truth, although they have no answers.

Being *with* the reality of another’s situation and our own, is all about vulnerability – letting go of control, letting go our agenda, and being open to what is.

I think we know it when we do it. I feel it almost physically, like dropping down into my gut, stilling, waiting. It takes courage and patience. But when we dare it, something profound begins to happen ... our anxiety lessens, our listening deepens. And with it, our capacity to respond. This deep listening is a second essential capacity of self-hood if we're serious about service.

This is because responses that emerge from deep listening, from being honestly and non-compulsively open to what's there, are very different from reactions driven by anxiety and a need to assert control. From this place of deep and patient listening, we're more able to discern the kind of speech or action that will truly serve, to let the situation itself suggest the way ahead, rather than desperately, often violently, imposing my will and preconceived ideas.

And vital in the process, this deepened listening also enables me to listen for my role, my responsibility, my true calling. And how important is that for students? I remember in year 10, when I was trying to choose subjects for my final two years. I was desperate to equip myself to be of service. Medicine seemed about the worthiest profession I could think of – so despite the fact that my real love was the humanities, literature and history, I thought I should choose subjects like chemistry, biology and maths. It was so not me! Luckily for me – and doubtless for the world – my mother who'd been listening to me for years, intervened. She suggested I was more likely to be of real service if I trusted my love and my gifts. Unknowingly, she echoed the words of American theologian, Frederick Buechner: true vocation is 'the place where your own deep *gladness* meets the world's deep need'.

The problem for many students (and most of us), is that in a world of such serious need, it's hard to believe we're allowed to be glad, let alone see it as intrinsic to our vocation. Especially when our passion doesn't seem to have any immediate utilitarian potential. Parker Palmer describes his own journey with this difficult

realisation. It began when he admitted he could no longer go on as a community organiser working in troubled American cities in the late 1960s. He found it difficult to come to terms, he says, with this ‘failure’, but gradually saw how joy-sapping and self-defeating his commitment had turned out to be. ‘I had been driven more by the “oughts” of the urban crisis than by a sense of true self’, he said. ‘Lacking insight into my own limits and potentials, I had allowed ego and ethics to lead me into a situation that my soul could not abide’.<sup>3</sup>

The counter-intuitive truth is that being in the world as a transforming and healing presence is not about adopting the noblest, most worthy sounding work as one’s own. Rather it’s about discerning the deep call on *your* life – your own deep gladness. Palmer writes: ‘If I try to be or do something noble that has nothing to do with who I am, I may look good to others and to myself [... *pause*] for a while. But the fact that I am exceeding my limits will eventually have consequences. I ... may end up doing more damage than if I had never set out to do this particular “good”’.<sup>4</sup> In truth, we don’t always know how our vocation will contribute to the whole – how parenting these children, working in this field, creating this garden, teaching this room full of children – will make a difference. We just trust, that done with integrity, if it’s mine to do, it will. I think of Michael Leunig, whose faithfulness to simple poetry helps keep a government and a people honest. Who’d ‘a thunk it?

Which brings me to a third vital capacity of self-hood. Non-attachment. Non-attachment is freedom from self-concern, self-obsession, self-indulgence. It doesn’t mean being ‘uncommitted’, not caring how things turn out. Rather, it’s the freedom to work beyond ego, without it being all about me, my image, my results. Yes – of course, outcomes matter. There’s no point doing something that’s not achieving

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<sup>3</sup> Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, p.22.

<sup>4</sup> Palmer, *Let Your Life Speak*, p.47.

anything. The problem comes, though, when we use our achievements as the prime indicator of our worth.

My life can be ostensibly about making a difference, yet if honest I am still central to the picture. I'm using good works to justify myself, make myself whole, gain another's approval. 'Look at her – isn't she doing great things?' But when I try to shore up my worth in this way, I have no freedom and neither does anyone else. It's manipulative and alienating – it causes disillusionment and likely burnout. By contrast, when I give myself joyfully to the work of my calling, and it's not all about me, there is surprising freedom. I'm graced with what's needed to keep going even in the face of criticism, disappointment and overwhelming odds. True service and self-forgetfulness always go together.

So – being with; listening deeply; non-attachment ... these capacities of self are vital for service which truly engages our world's need. Without them, our well-intentioned efforts founder – even do damage. If we're serious about forming students as agents of transformation then these are the qualities we and the world needs.

So how do we nurture these ways of being in our schools? How might we foster these not simply as abstract values, but as part of each student's lived experience, as something they taste and can return to throughout their lives?

### **A Spirituality of Service**

To be vulnerably with what is, to listen deeply and let go attachment to success - to live with this kind of freedom and openness to others, we need (it seems to me) to be connected to a basic experience of wholeness, a sense of peace about who we are. In theological terms this is about the lived experience of communion and belonging, which enables the possibility of humility, trust and self-dispossession.

We don't get to this place by being morally earnest or even by committing to so-called Christian values. We get here by the lived experience of being held in and called by a gracious, giving reality ... in whose light we know ourselves and others as free to be, accepted and loved.

What kind of service learning curriculum, what spirituality in the life of a school community, would create an environment conducive to this encounter with wholeness and grace, and the ways of being that flow from it? Let me offer a few reflections – which I hope we can explore in discussion shortly.

It seems to me that some kind of contemplative practice is important for cultivating these vital capacities of self. By contemplation, I mean a practice of silent meditation or mindfulness. Meditation is a form of Christian prayer, though largely neglected in the Western church until recently. It's being introduced to schools in age appropriate ways in many places in Australia and around the world.

Why is it significant? It's a way of practising, embodying the qualities of self-hood necessary for transforming engagement in the world. In meditation, we learn to 'be with' God, ourselves, and what arises, without attempting to fix or censor it in the first instance. So it cultivates our capacity to let things and people be. By the practice of focusing on a single object, it cultivates attention – the precondition for deep listening. And during the time of meditation, we let go all thoughts including our usual worries, plans and obsessions. So it strengthens our capacity to let go self-concern, to practise non-attachment.

As we persevere, the practice of meditation leads us more fully into a sense of the gracious horizon of our lives. Over time this does change us. We have a fuller sense of belonging, experience a peace beyond our understanding, and so are liberated to love in liberating ways. In the practice of meditation, we encounter the reality to

which the gospel testifies. As John Main, the Benedictine teacher of contemplative prayer, has said: ‘in meditation, we verify the truths of our faith in our own experience’.

Reflection is another practice for nurturing the capacities of self-hood I’ve discussed. A gifted primary teacher I know begins each school day with a gathering circle. The children are invited to sit together, a candle at the centre. It’s a non-anxious and hospitable start. The children are allowed to be, and to share (if they wish) what’s going on for them. They’re encouraged to be in touch with themselves, and to name their experience. My friend reports that this is challenging to sustain in a busy school context, and yet her observation is that it makes a profound difference to the quality of her class’s learning and relationships. Here’s another practice that cultivates a deeper listening, and the capacity to be with self and others. It attends seriously to the *being* of children, in the midst of the ever-present demands of a performance-oriented curriculum.

As students grow older and participate in service learning programs, there could be opportunities for related approaches through spacious, ‘non-assessable’ circles of trust. I imagine students being encouraged to reflect regularly over several years (not just as a one-off at the Year 12 retreat) and in a safe context, to deepen self-knowledge by attending, for example, to their way of being with peers, their relationship to leadership and authority, their feelings about aspects of their own experience and growth. I imagine students being offered opportunities to practise discernment of their gifts and passions, to be with the dilemma of competing demands and expectations, and begin to get in touch with their own wisdom.

Similarly, the opportunity to engage in disciplined reflection in relation to particular experiences of service may help to deepen students’ awareness of the assumptions and unconscious motives they’re bringing to their engagement with

others, enable exploration of the challenge and complexity of deep listening, and cultivate students' capacity to be with unknowing and vulnerability.

All these formative practices – meditation, reflection, discernment – enact trust that if we take time to be present and to attend, we will come closer to reality and be changed by it. These approaches are profoundly faith-based, consonant with the gospel. They don't just talk *about* this gracious reality and its values. They embody it and so enable access to it. Service learning which is embedded in and shaped by such a formative context must, it seems to me, be less inclined to unthinking paternalism and even exploitation of those purportedly being served, and also less inclined to alienate students from their own gifts and call.

### **Service and Learning**

I want finally, however, to mention two systemic questions which seem to be raised by what I've said.

Earlier I claimed that truly serving others is not about adopting the noblest, most worthy sounding work as one's own. It's about discerning the deep call on *your* life, and I've just spoken about the ways in which intentional practices of formation within a service learning curriculum might cultivate students' capacity for such discernment.

I wonder, however if there's a danger that the very concept of 'service learning' contributes to confusion at this point. I note that the content of what we call 'service learning' in schools seems primarily focused on service as practical help, as advocacy and activism. The paradigm of 'service' is of taking overt action for social justice. But, in our world, are not physicists and climate scientists among the most significant servants of human kind? Or those who can think critically and write creatively, and so

reimagine our world, or reconnect us to others? And if that's so, why isn't doing science or literature or learning a language also conceived of as service learning?

I understand that when everything is 'service learning' then, in a sense, nothing is. I understand that having a particular focus on the notion of service, tied to particular kinds of activities, is an important way of inviting students to see themselves as part of a wider world in which they have a part to play. I guess I'm wondering, though, if we need to be aware of what gets labelled 'service' and what doesn't – and perhaps the unintended consequences of that (so for me, leaving Year 12, doing medicine looked like 'service' and studying medieval history didn't. And that, for me, was a stumbling block). This I think heightens the significance of the 'formation' element in service learning curricula since this may help students begin to relate to *anything* they might go on to do as potentially oriented to the common weal, as flowing out of deep listening and offered for love of the world.

And second, I think we need to be critically aware of the wider school context in which service learning is offered. I have sketched a spirituality of service learning, and suggested a number of practices that might be important in this regard. The difficult truth, though, is that the effect of these practices will remain limited if the rest of the school culture communicates something different. It's of little use telling students that the true horizon of life is gracious, whole-making and non-anxious, if the prevailing message of the system they inhabit is one of scarcity, competition, evaluation, freighted with expectations to do with achievement and securing the future. It's the whole context that forms and deforms, and the context is always exerting its influence.

Schools are complex systems operating under great strain, labouring to measure up to economic and educational bottom lines. Pressure about results, competitive ranking, league tables, the demands of a national curriculum, ambitious parents,

anxious children, and time poor – teachers, chaplains and principals work in a difficult, stressful environment. And like it or not, these pressures also affect the classroom – and the messages students pick up about what really matters.

We say we want to form students capable of transforming action, and of true service. We want them to taste an experience of wholeness from which flow the capacities to be with what is, to listen deeply and let go obsessive self-concern and attachment to success. If we're serious about this, a truly radical vision would be to create a more spacious, less driven culture in the whole school.

And without this deeper cultural change, service learning programs, it seems to me, are always in danger of being co-opted by anxious and self-oriented agendas, with schools jostling (via their prospectuses) for the most prestigious or exotic sounding student service opportunities with scant regard for their impact on the wider world. And this suggests that perhaps one of the real services offered by a spiritually formative service learning curriculum will be to begin transforming the culture of our schools themselves.