

THE 2010 WILLIAM OATS MEMORIAL LECTURE
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**“Nourishing the Spirit in the 21st Century:
a Challenge for Education”**

I would like to explore the notion that, as a 21st Century society, we need to develop a common understanding of the purpose of education. Increasingly the aims of education are focused on economic growth and the primary purpose of education is to teach students to be economically productive. The education revolution is aimed at “building skills for the globalised economies of the future” and “building a just and equitable society.” These are admirable goals but only half the story.

Seeing students *only* as potential workers ignores the view that education, which starts at birth, with parents the primary teachers, has a deeper purpose. It is also about individuals:

- developing the sense of identity, self worth and connection that is fundamental to a capacity to give and receive love;
- developing a set of spiritual values and ethical standards, to guide them through life;
- developing dispositions, attributes and attitudes to guide learning and life;
- developing the spiritual resources of imagination, intuition, and the social, emotional and creative skills to be able to put their cognitive skills to the best use.

It's about individuals:

- being enabled to find what they are good at, by engaging with a rich and rigorous curriculum, through knowledgeable, skilled and passionate teachers;
- becoming just and equitable people, for to have a just and equitable society we have to first have just and equitable people, who value the worth of others, who have a capacity for the critical thinking, reflection and imagination that is necessary for humane and active participation in a democracy.

As all good teachers will tell you these values, standards, skills, attributes and attitudes are slow growing habits of character, the result of daily nurture within a community of common purpose. They are reflected upon, role modelled, understood, internalised and become simply a way of life. This is the work of teachers, day in day

out, and it is a travesty that the voice of teachers talking about their work is not heard above the clamour of the unions.

It matters what kind of community the school is. It matters that there is a strong congruence of values, beliefs and attitudes about life and learning amongst all members of the school community. This is the spiritual capital, the underpinning moral purpose that gives coherence to everything else. It matters – and I quote William Oats – “that a school (is) a place where children can be happy in their learning and that happiness depends to a great extent, on the quality of relationships in the school community”¹ It matters that there is a culture of mutual respect, high expectations, creativity and an awareness of and response to, the needs of others.

William Oats, whose wisdom and spirit continues to inspire even to this day, draws a distinction between training and education. Training, he says, is concerned with conforming to pre-determined outcomes, learning to count, learning to read, fundamental skills. Education, he describes as the nurture of the spirit, “in the self, the nucleus, there lies all the potential of becoming both in terms of potential and uniqueness”.² Education is nurturing from the inside out; training (or schooling) is imprinting from the outside in. Education, then, is so much more than academic standards and the acquisition of skills to build the workforce. It is the “sum of all the forces that nourish the growth of the individual self. And learning is the response of the individual to those forces.”³

Writing in 1990, William Oats expressed the concern that education was confronting a crisis of confidence and an uncertainty of purpose. Education is no longer seen as being concerned with spiritual values, but even so, “the responsibility for the moral and emotional development of the young has been unloaded onto the teacher”⁴

There is growing concern in our community about the moral development of young people. There is concern about the sort of society we live in. The media is dominated by reports of drug and alcohol related problems, violence perpetrated by increasingly younger and increasingly female protagonists, second generation and now third generation unemployment, has become accepted as a way of life, families struggle to have influence on child behaviour, which is increasingly becoming the responsibility of the teacher. The high rate of anxiety and depression amongst young people is becoming a serious issue for our country.

There is concern that the digital natives of the 21st century will have neither the inclination nor the capacity for deep critical thinking, reflection,⁵ or empathy and that they will undermine the world with their alien values. There is concern about those whose identity, self worth, and sense of belonging hasn't been established. Without solid role models they tend to engage with the world through the media and look for meaning in money, fame and celebrity. Celebrity tells them what's in, what's out and what is

successful. It's nice and clear. Identity founded on such shifting sands is very fragile and open to manipulation.

These are concerns about the sort of people our children may become and they go beyond what the curriculum should be and how it should be taught.⁶ With the decline in the influence of institutionalised religion, more parents are seeking guidance about inculcating moral and ethical standards and spiritual values, (not necessarily religiously based), in their children. Recently the *Mercury* reported that 91% of 1000 parents surveyed wanted values and manners taught in schools.⁷

A Chaplaincy program is operating in some State schools. In NSW ethics philosophy classes are being trialled. Victoria is debating a similar move. Even in our own community there is much talk of the need to educate the public, particularly those who hold public office, in ethics. A new Integrity Commission has just been established with a strong educative role. "Corruption" has become a mantra with little understanding of what actually constitutes real corruption.

But these things – ethics, integrity and values beyond self interest – cannot be mandated by rules and regulations and simply tacked onto an already crowded curriculum. They have to be nurtured in the individual and nourished daily by the community in which the individual develops: primarily, of course, the family. In this context, one of the greatest advantages in life is to have engaged, informed and loving parents, one of the greatest injustices, is not to. Parents are

the primary teachers and schools are simply one influence on the growing mind and heart, but they can either reinforce or undermine the achievements of the family, good or bad. They can also shape the peer culture and what they provide in content and pedagogy can affect the developing child's mind" ⁸ William Oats points out that "The ethos of a school does not (only) have to be determined by religious affiliation but by the vision and dedication of the teachers involved and their concern to nurture spiritual values in the daily life of the school community."⁹

So what is our understanding of the purpose of education?

To reach a common understanding of the deeper purpose of education in the 21st Century, we need to be clear about what we want from education, and to know what we want from education we need to know what we want from life in general. What sort of people and what sort of society do we want for now and the future? This is too important to leave in the hands of politicians, at the mercy of electoral cycles and it cannot be the sole responsibility of teachers. We are all responsible and we must all take responsibility, for nothing will change until, as a society, we build a culture – one that does not presently exist in our country– of valuing education.

In seeking a common understanding of what we want from education we must not forget that we are a product of our past. Therefore, we need to become knowledgeable about the changes that have made the present so confrontingly different from the world we were taught to trust in our childhood. We need to understand how

these changes impact both negatively and positively on our daily life so that, as effective and optimistic future makers, rather than pessimistic uninformed bystanders, we can make wise contributions to society and the future of our world and its people.¹⁰

After all, is that not what being an educated person is all about? Being knowledgeable about and understanding what is happening in the world; having the capacity to think, reflect and make informed judgements for ourselves, guided by our moral and ethical principles; having the creative capacity to find solutions to challenges and take independent action; and believing that we are not powerless – all of these make us autonomous human beings and maximise our resilience in an era of rapid change. The same goes for our children and it is on them that I would like to focus in this paper, for if we value each of them, as individuals, then our purpose is to enable each individual to become the best person he or she can be, spiritually, socially and intellectually and society, school culture and pedagogical practice must support this purpose.

So, what about our present education system ?

In his book, *What's the Point of School?* Guy Claxton, one of the UK's foremost thinkers on creativity learning and the brain, postulates that the education system as a whole operates as a kind of assembly line where students go through in batches with different experts bolting on little specialised bits as they go through, until at the end quality control dumps half of them".¹¹ He asserts that whole image

of school is “outmoded and dysfunctional. “We must do everything in our power to help students build confidence, resilience and the capacity to deal with a complicated world”¹².

The way forward, says Claxton, is to “adjust the culture of the learning environment in simple practical ways to encourage students to become more resilient, resourceful, reflective and reciprocal, so that *when* learning becomes difficult students *will* be able to focus, stay engaged despite distractions, take ownership for their own learning, use a range of approaches to learning, and become autonomous thinkers as well as good collaborators”¹³ Humans have an innate capacity to adapt to adverse conditions and this capacity can be developed through increasing students’ self- esteem, self efficacy and autonomy.

So, should not the nurture of confidence, resilience, self efficacy, autonomous thinking, and the capacity to deal with a complicated world be a core purpose of education in the 21st Century?

But, says internationally recognised educational writer Erica McWilliams, in *The Creative Workforce*, we live in a consumer age, where the refocus of education is towards economic ends and the discourse is of excellence, performance enhancement, efficiency and effectiveness of the workforce. She says that “we live and work in response to education policies that mandate rapid change, driven by tables, tests, targets and electoral cycles.”¹⁴ The language of management has dominated education since the late 90’s. But is

there a zephyr of change on the horizon? Catherine Fox of the *Financial Review*¹⁵ tells us that executive education itself is refocusing on “areas that are not as financial – more about people issues , emotional intelligence, perceptions, awareness, how to deal with individuals and some of the personal challenges.”

Furthermore, says business strategist Roger Martin,¹⁶ employers want graduates with depth and breadth: “We want them ... for their ability to think across boundaries ... to solve wicked problems as well as ordinary ones and to exercise judgment – all attributes of design thinking.”¹⁷ The imagination and creative capacity of their workers is now the most valuable resource of companies, particularly in the fast growing area of social entrepreneurship, involving philanthropic investment in innovative, sustainable business solutions to social and global challenges; solutions that will provide opportunities for long term employment, for people in developing countries.

McWilliams says that creativity is the “ability to repurpose information by viewing linkages across disparate fields of knowledge and activity, as well as using high levels of literacy and numeracy, to work across the domains of the conceptual and the aesthetic.”¹⁸ Creative insights come from seeing connections and similarities between things we haven’t noticed before. “Creative work also reaches deep into our intuitive and unconscious minds and into our hearts and feelings”;¹⁹ in other words into our spirit. Teaching is essentially creative work, spiritual work. Training, concentrating on predetermined outcomes is not. But McWilliams warns that

creativity may be hindered by embedded notions of teaching and learning, societal expectations and increasing demands of assessment regimes.

So should not the nurture of imagination, emotional intelligence, creativity and the capacity to think across boundaries to solve problems, be a core purpose of education in the 21st Century?

So often when we use the word education we assume we have a common understanding of what the word means, but in reality our understanding of the meaning and purpose of education is no more than a personal belief about what *we* value. Teachers' beliefs about the purpose of education lie at the heart of their teaching practice and are often complex, arising from personal values and experience, and to this extent the experience in two classrooms can never be the same. Likewise parents' and indeed society's views of education are similarly diverse, depending on their perspective. Yet we all have the same job description, to nurture a successful individual. But as William Oats says, "It is much easier to formulate sociological goals for the educational process than to define the developmental needs of the individual." ²⁰

Any discussion about common purpose must accept that effective education is very much about the individual. Attaining any educational goals still depend largely upon the individual child and the individual teacher, the characteristics of the child entering school

and the quality of the teacher in the classroom. In fact “the quality of an education system cannot exceed the quality of its teachers.”²¹

Almost all children start school with sparkling imaginations, fertile minds, robust curiosity and willingness to take risks. These attributes are the fundamentals of successful learning throughout life and surely should be common attributes of passionate learners and workers. And yet so many children seem to end up unimaginative and uninspired, de-motivated and alienated from the culture of education. Our year 10 retention rates attest to that.

It is not a matter of blaming teachers. It is a systemic problem in the nature of our education systems which try to make education “teacher proof” and “student proof”²² by standardising quality control in a one size fits all approach that if we are not careful can kill passion and motivation both for students and teachers and extinguish creativity. Education leaders are caught in a delicate balance between outside accountability pressures, increasing centralised control, and enriching the school community’s perceptions as to what constitutes a good education and delivering it.

William Oats writing in 1973 said, “Secondary schools have tended to operate like apple grading machines....processing, grading, classifying, certificating.most teachers are caught up in the pass-fail role and see their job as getting the raw material successfully processed and labelled. The self, however is withered by continual threat of failure. Fear of failure saps strength, discourages effort and

lowers self esteem.”²³ And in 2010 we still do not teach our children how to deal with failure.

So I suggest that education is not *only* about “building skills for the globalised economies of the future”, or indeed about “building a just and equitable society.” It is about building the lives of individuals and we must not lose sight of this deeper purpose by allowing media obsession with league tables to distract us from the bigger issues, more difficult to deal with.

Sharing a common understanding of the purpose of education leaves unanswered the issue of how to deliver it, for delivering an education that values the nurturing of self worth, independence, resilience, autonomy, experimentation and creativity is hampered by the current political and moral climate of danger minimisation which Ulrich Beck describes as “Risk society²⁴”. Such a society is all about “paying attention to the negatives and focusing on, [and anticipating] what can go wrong”. And yet, we didn’t anticipate the experience of terrorism, that has instilled in our hearts an underlying anxiety and fear for the safety of our children that has robbed them of their carefree childhood. That fear, capitalised on by the media, is so imbedded it colours with caution our daily living and makes us much more accepting of authority and control. We have all allowed ourselves to become victims of “Risk Society” – helicopter parents, cottonwool kids, security measures, terrorism laws, and so on.

A corollary of this environment is the tendency to eliminate opportunities for error-making in the service of building self esteem, thereby running the risk of protecting young people from learning itself. Another corollary is the tendency to pile on unearned praise to protect delicate egos, something that is counterproductive, for it contributes to vulnerability, a preference for easy success, and dependence on constant reassurance, rather than building emotional and mental robustness.

For many parents and teachers, failure and error are now seen as negatives for their young charges. If students see every big challenge, every tough choice, every failed project as a threat to self esteem then we confuse threat with challenge. Neuroscientists are joining the ranks of those who argue for a more experimental and error-welcoming mode of learning as a path to wiring the brain for creative thinking, finding alternative options, other solutions, while at the same time building resilience, resourcefulness, self efficacy²⁵ and the capacity to deal with the unexpected.

Our young people need to be in a trusting learning environment of low threat and high challenge where growth is nurtured without constantly lifting the roots see how it's going. One way of doing this, suggests Carol Dweck, is to make a clear distinction between personal "learning goals" and "performance goals". Personal "learning goals" are characterised by a desire to develop new skills, master new tasks, or understand new things. "Performance goals"

are focused on winning positive judgement of your competence and avoiding negative ones.²⁶

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So, what does matter in education in the 21st Century? No one questions the fact that high standards of literacy and numeracy are fundamental to functioning effectively in society or that a modern democracy needs a strong economy. No one questions the need to test to standards but the concern is with the preoccupation with testing and that, with the media driven obsession with league tables and competition akin to reality TV, teaching to the test will become a priority, at the expense of other areas such as a rich curriculum, deep understanding and the nurturing of imagination, creativity, confidence and individual talent. It's a matter of balance and Robinson suggests that there are more effective ways of achieving a better result.

The most important data of all relate to how students are achieving in relation to their personal learning plans as well as against standards.”²⁷ And this is exactly what a Victorian study has shown. Under a new teaching strategy, schools changed the way teachers collected and assessed students' literacy data. Teachers work in teams to examine data and use it to set specific targets and teaching strategies for groups of students under the supervision of education specialists. The gains in literacy achievement are 3 times higher than the state average.²⁸

In an address on ABC radio in 1972, William Oats drew on the Quaker respect for the intrinsic worth of each person in articulating “that the purpose of education is to nourish the growth of the individual self, awakening the individual’s response and spirit of inquiry so that each wants to learn”.²⁹

Our children need to discover what they are good at and be inspired to meet personal challenges and feel the success of authentic achievement in a range of contexts. We so often underestimate their capacity until we see them inspired to learn in the hands of a good teacher. Sir Ken Robinson is a leader in creativity, innovation and human capacity, winner of the Ben Franklin medal and knighted for his contribution to education and arts. In his book, *The Element*, he argues that the nurture of creativity and talent in each child is essential to survival in the 21st Century. He calls the meeting point between natural aptitude and personal passion “the element.” People who are in their element, he says, “connect with something fundamental to their sense of identity, purpose and well being”. The people who can cope with and contribute to the breathless rate of change in the 21st Century will be people who are in their element and with that passion are able to inspire others.

Talent expresses itself in a diverse, dynamic way, distinct to each individual. What that means for education, says Robinson, is the existing hierarchy of subjects, with maths and science at the top and the humanities in the middle and the arts at the bottom, should

be eliminated, for this hierarchy offends the principle of diversity. Secondly, the curriculum should be dynamic and fluid allowing for both disciplinary knowledge and interdisciplinary agility. And thirdly, learning should be personalised, distinct to each person. "Learning," Sir Ken says, rather provocatively, "happens in the minds and souls of individuals not in the data bases of multiple choice tests."³⁰

Says William Oats, the educational processes should be, "as much concerned with the emotions as with the intellect, with creativity as with rational thought. Schools should give more attention to the creative arts [for] the self is nurtured by the imagination, by sensitivity to truth and beauty ..."³¹

I personally believe that the humanities and the arts are crucial to a compassionate society and healthy democracy. These disciplines stir the emotions and fire the imagination as well as the intellect. They invite us to critically examine and reflect, with both mind and heart, on the human condition, both past and present, and on the predicaments of others. Julian Burnside, human rights activist and barrister, made this observation. "[Through art] I learned the interesting idea that it was possible to question the existing order. Simply the freedom to explore other ways of seeing the world"³²

All children should have the opportunity to learn the interesting idea that it is possible to question the existing order and have the freedom to explore other ways of seeing the world. Many thousands

of children have that opportunity already but many do not. That is not good enough.

We need to refresh and deepen our understanding of the importance of the relationship between teacher and child and the critical role the teacher plays in developing in each child a sense of identity, security and an assurance of being valued. As William Oats reminds us “this is the source of the child’s own sense of empowerment.”³³ This relationship can either nourish the spirit of the child and ignite the flame of learning or can dampen or at worst extinguish both.

For the individual student, school is not only about the future, it is about the present, the daily interactions; the here and now. The inspiring teacher, the dull teacher, the bully in playground, the fragile self esteem, the anxiety, the relationships both real and cyber, success, failure, inclusion, exclusion all have day to day immediacy and shape the person we become. Julian Burnside, who was educated at a private school, wrote, “I rarely think about my school days, because my 12 years there are overshadowed by the main lesson I learned from its frowning battlements. As other students took on the trade mark confidence ... my own self doubts hardened into a certainty, that I would never be quite adequate, that I was second rate.”³⁴

How many children learned that the system did not believe in them and so lost faith in themselves?

The attributes and personal qualities of a successful teacher, the things we need to grasp and bottle, are not only a profound understanding of what they are teaching and a passion to pass it on but also a respect for their students and a belief in their ability to learn. The real challenges and opportunities for education in the 21st Century will only be met by reassessing our obsession with performance testing being the measure educational success, and by enabling well educated “passionate and creative teachers, who are at the forefront of knowledge and skill, to be the best they can be and [to fire] up the imagination and motivation of students”,³⁵ in an environment where they want to learn.

A national priority should be to encourage people with an aptitude for teaching to become teachers who are in their element in the classroom. The next challenge will be to give those teachers and their leadership teams, adequate resources and the freedom to decide how best to create a culture that allows “teacher and taught to breathe and glow”,³⁶ and excel in a learning community of high intellectual, social, creative and spiritual capital, and strong moral purpose.

Nourishing the spirit of each student, helping each to find foundational values and ethical standards that will guide them through the tough as well as the good times in life and challenging them to find what they are good at, often comes from someone “who sees in us, what we don’t see in ourselves.” That person is often a

teacher. "How many men and women can point to a teacher who saw and believed in them when they neither saw nor believed this deepest thing in themselves? Always remember that "the teacher did not *put* this deepest thing there. It was there already. But [the teacher] confirmed it."³⁷

By all accounts William Oats was one of those teachers. Old scholars remember that he had gift for connecting with young people, taking a great interest in each, listening to their opinions, taking each one seriously, challenging them intellectually and giving them responsibility. Many recall his sessions on ethics as landmarks in their thinking and growing up. An old scholar recalls, "The ethical and moral reference points Bill clearly drew in the sand have helped many of us through the trials and tribulations of life."

His infectious love and knowledge of music permeated the school and perhaps the memory most referred to other than personal kindnesses is the whole school singing at each speech night. An old scholar remembers that, "Students filed onto the stands at the front of the city hall and there was a hush before WNO smiled at us and lifted his baton and we started singing, finishing with 'O Come All Ye Faithful' and the descant soaring up, and then the silence afterwards, and the feeling of community."

It seems to me that the educational philosophy and practice of William Oats is as refreshing and relevant today as it was visionary

forty years ago. But the fact is there is no secret template that if followed to the letter will create a successful school and a good education – but having the right people is a big step in the right direction. Mandated rules and regulations, centralised control and the micro management of teachers certainly won't guarantee a successful school. Schools are simply the sum of the people in them and each has to find its own identity, and strive to create the conditions and culture that will best meet the needs of its students and inspire each to find their element and place in the community.

However, developing a common understanding of the purpose of education based on shared values articulated by the school community and directed to the well being of the learner, is an invaluable source of strength and foundational reference for everything else. It is my belief, and experience, that if the spiritual and creative conditions are right, the intellect is enlivened and people are inspired grow in synergy with the people around them and are more likely to become the best they can be across all domains.

In the new creative economy it will be the quality of people that makes the difference, and the sustainable competitive advantage will be in building a culture that values people as individuals and enables creativity to excel. In contrast to the fast pace that characterises the 21st Century, such cultures are slow growing and of high value, for a unique mix of personal qualities and creative talent cannot be easily emulated. The same goes for schools.

A fundamental value underpinning education in the 21st Century must surely be the recognition of the inherent worth and unique individuality of each person and the purpose of education in the 21st Century, first and foremost, to provide the spiritual nurture and nourishment that “affirm(s) this sense of self worth, this creative potential, for without this as a base, other values cannot take hold.”³⁸

This is how William Oats saw it, in an address to the College of Education, and I quote: “Deep within each one of us is this evolutionary potential, this Human Spirit ... It strives for expression but rebels against dictation and dogma ... it relies upon its own intuitive powers of imagination to guide it..... This too is the promptings of love and truth in each one of us,....”³⁹

We could do a lot worse than reflect on the promptings of William Oats, in seeking to nurture confident, compassionate, fulfilled, young people of integrity; to develop their capacity to engage, the heart, the intellect and the imagination, in contributing thoughtfully to intercultural understanding, a just and equitable society and to finding creative solutions for the global and social challenges of the 21st Century.

Frances Underwood Friday, 1 October 2010

¹ William Nicolle Oats, *Changes in the Climate of Education: An Address*, College of Education Tas. (South Branch).

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- ² William Nicolle Oats, *The Nurture of the Human Spirit*, The Friends School Tasmania, 1990.
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- ⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵ Richard Watson in *Education Review* APN Educational Media September 2009
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- ¹³ *ibid.*
- ¹⁴ Erica Mc William, *The Creative Workforce*, University of New South Wales Press, 2008.
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- ¹⁶ *AFR Boss* magazine, June 2010.
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- ¹⁹ Ken Robinson, *The Element*, Viking Penguin USA, 2009.
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- ²¹ Matt Campbell in *The Australian*, 20 July 2010, quoting the 2007 McKinsey and Company report.
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- ²⁴ Erica McWilliam, *The Creative Workforce*, University of NSW Press, 2008.
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- ³¹ William Nicolle Oats, *The Nurture of the Human Spirit* The Friends School Tasmania, 1990.
- ³² Julian Burnside, *Watching Brief: Reflections on Human Rights Law and Justice*, Scribe Publications, Victoria 2007.
- ³³ William Nicolle Oats, *Changes in the Climate of Education* An Address, College of Education Tas. (South Branch.)
- ³⁴ Julian Burnside *Watching Brief Reflections on Human Rights Law and Justice*, Scribe Publications, Victoria 2007.
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- ³⁸ William Nicolle Oats, *Changes in the Climate of Education* An Address, College of Education Tas. (South Branch.)
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