

# Some Day

## – messages from the classroom

*Address at a conference of the National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE) in 1997 at the University of York. The conference title was "Messages from the Classroom".*

---

Dear Robin

I am writing on behalf of the NATE conference organising committee to thank you for your contribution at the start of our conference at York last Tuesday afternoon.

Thus begins a letter, dated 7 April, which I received this morning before leaving home for the last stage of my journey to York. Today, as you know, is 1 April.

Now all efficient conference organisers, I am aware, like to write their thank-you letters to visiting speakers before the conference actually starts. For what few scraps of energy they have left after the conference are better used for beginning to implement conference action plans, and all that, than for the fruitless (as it usually is) chore of dropping a line to speakers.

It is rare in my experience, however, for thank-you letters to be actually *sent* before the conference.

I do not know, I admit, whether all the other speakers at the NATE conference have already received their post-conference thank-you letters, nor whether the early sending of this letter was deliberate or was the consequence of a small administrative error. But whatever the background may be, I thought as I shlepped up the motorway on the last stage of my journey here today (the journey as a whole has taken several decades, by the way), that it would be relevant to quote a few extracts.

Modesty prevents me from quoting it in full. Honesty and humility, however, require that I should quote certain phrases from it - 'lack of clear direction' ... 'inconsequential and opaque asides'... 'exhibitionist recourse to obscurantist irony'... 'several errors, as the lecture developed, of taste and judgement culminating in a quite serious transgression of decorum and convention' ... 'impish flippancy betokening misuse of power and responsibility'... 'clumsy use of the tricks, arts and tomfoolery of a seducer' ... and (this in particular, I don't mind admitting, was a bit wounding) 'anti-climax at the end'. I will refer again to some of these helpful criticisms in due course. Just at the moment, in case there is any doubt, I should like to stress that the letter as a whole is a model of courtesy, gentleness and moderation.

Then also here today I should like to quote from a letter which I received last week from

the Secretary of State for Education. I had written to him suggesting various new policies in the education system, and most NATE members will find his reply stimulating. A third letter I propose sharing is from an organisation known as Loony Left Associates Limited. LLA is a small team of freelance consultants who, according to their publicity material, 'provide advice and support for local education authorities, schools, classrooms and individuals on how to make fools of themselves'. Using the thoughts and suggestions of LLA, I shall sketch out – to use phrasing in this conference's title – a message from the classroom.

But before continuing with any of these three communications, I must stress that being invited to speak to the annual NATE conference is one of the greatest honours I have ever received. I have never been a teacher of English myself, but throughout my life since the age of about 15 I have admired, respected and envied teachers of English, and at any one time, if I remember correctly, I have felt total adoration towards at least one of them. It has been their message from the classroom which, more than any other single message, has kept me going. Here are a few notes of autobiography to evoke some of the places I have been over the years, some of the times I've had in the decades-long shlepp that brings me here today. In the style of a curriculum vitae, the story is as follows.

- 1960s Began my career as a teacher in autumn 1960, with *The Uses of Literacy* as the single most inspiring non-fiction book I'd ever read, and with a teacher of English as a close companion and mentor. Clipped articles by David Holbrook from the *Manchester Guardian*. Towards the end of the decade would hang on the words of a colleague who told wonderful stories about conferences and events he had attended, organised by NATE.
- 1970s Worked throughout the decade in curriculum development. Fascinated and inspired by the work of the English teaching community which culminated in the Bullock Report, and by the journal TLK, *Teaching London Kids*. Also by the HCP, the Humanities Curriculum Project, largely led by former teachers of English with their stress on the concept of teacher-as-artist, particularly performing artist, particularly actor. The curriculum as script, the teacher as actor, it was and is a message of haunting inspiration.
- 1980s Throughout the decade was in local government advisory services. Learnt more than I can say from individual teachers of English as an Additional Language (E2L as it was in those days), their knowledge, energy, strength, courage, good cheer, and from a close colleague who was extremely active in NATE, at one point as its chairperson.
- 1990s Involved in race equality work in a range of social policy areas. Took some part in defending Culloden School, Tower Hamlets, against the government and its principal rottweiler, *The Mail on Sunday*, and watched in awe and joy as the English teaching community fought various rearguard actions against the government, and won some of them, thus keeping hope in the spirits of millions

of other people alive. Latterly have renewed close acquaintance with English as an Additional Language, and its emphasis on holding together linguistic, academic, cognitive and social development, and all within a political analysis of culture, class and power.

In an adaptation of Bill Clinton's famous phrase. the message I have received from the classroom over the decades is simply summarised: "It's justice, stupid." Unpacked a bit, the message is fourfold: teachers are co-creators of culture; teachers are in the justice-creation business; teachers know and nurture the young; teachers are artists, with the curriculum as script and themselves as both scriptwriters and performers.

As I look back here today over the long journey to York, I remember one event, one image, with haunting clarity. About 35 years ago I attended a weekend drama course for teachers organised by a local NATE branch. I have forgotten everything that happened that weekend, apart from one moment. It haunts me still, that moment, that sight, it pesters me, will not let me go, it nags me to give it form and frame. One half of the course members, the half of which I was not myself a member, rehearsed and presented a performance in which they were dressed as clowns.

It was a Brechtian play-within-a-play, a frame-within-a-frame, and one of the things these clowns did was stage a demonstration. What they were demonstrating for or against, I no longer know, perhaps I didn't know at the time, perhaps they didn't say. Anyway, they processed round the hall in a long untidy file and they sang. What I remember is that procession, and that song. They carried placards, and round they went, trudging, shuffling, slouching, plodding, shlepping, dragging their feet, their faces blank, dull, void, impassive, deathly, inane, there was not a sparkle or speck of life in their limbs or in their eyes. From their mouths there came a song, flat, raucous, lacklustre, obscenely out of tune.

I remember, this is what haunts me, one member of the procession in particular. He was one of the two course tutors, a professional actor when he wasn't running courses for teachers. It was he who, as course tutor, had directed, produced and coached this performance, this procession. But he wasn't at the head of the procession, he was insignificantly trudging along near the tail. He was a nobody, a slight little nonentity lost in the crowd. But his was the most inane and expressionless face of all, his the most lifeless and hollow eyes, his the most worldweary gait, his the most discordant voice as he howled, raucously and emptily along with the others . . . *"we shall overcome . . . oh, deep in my heart, I do believe . . . we shall overcome, some day."*

Haunts me, will not let me go, pesters me to give it form and frame. Particularly those last two words, *"some day"*. A professional actor working with teachers; dressing them and himself as clowns; performing a play within a play; leading insignificantly from the tail; ending up an, sending up the, anthem of the decade.

What did it mean, on that day 30 years ago? What does it mean now? What does it say about, what frame does it put on, the last three decades of social and educational

history, and about my life and career, my decades-long shlepp to York to frame, here today, a message from the classroom? Was it clinical and healthy mockery of glib Sixties optimism, and has that mockery been systematically justified by the defeats we have suffered in education and society these last thirty years?

Was it cheerful, affectionate and comradely self-criticism amongst friends? Was I glimpsing the carrion comfort of despair, already gripping and paralysing some of the best hearts and minds in the land, though they didn't yet know it? Or was it the fierce, cheerful opposite of despair that the clowns paraded and celebrated?

An actor pretending to be a teacher pretending to be a clown pretending to be a character pretending to be a pessimist pretending to be an optimist: what was really there beneath the frames on frames? Limitless despair or limitless hope?

What was it I saw, on that weekend event for teachers of English 30 years ago this season? What have I been seeing ever since on this shlepp to York? What message is here now today? Haunts me. Shall I know, some day?

*Deep in my heart . .*

Limitless despair, or limitless dare-devil hope?

It's time to read this letter from the Secretary of State. Actually, I'm not totally sure, sorry, whether it is definitely from him. I had sent two identical letters, one to him and the other to the opposition spokesperson on education, outlining my ideas, and I'm not sure which of the two this reply is from. They faxed their reply, and my fax machine managed to cut off both the letterhead at the top of the first page and the signature at the bottom of the last.

The resulting lack of clarity is slightly inconvenient, I suppose, but hopefully not terribly significant. I wish, however, to be fair to the author of the letter, as you can readily imagine, and that is why I am not mentioning his (or her) name. The letter began as follows.

Thank you for your recent letter outlining policy ideas and priorities in the nation's education system. My colleagues and I are grateful for your helpful suggestions, and intend to implement them as soon as possible. We have some queries, however, and hope that you can please clarify your ideas in order to assist us further. There are seven principal topics on which we should value your advice. For convenience we itemise them below in note form.

#### **1 School uniform and livery to be worn by teachers**

We liked the designs which you submitted, but were not clear whether you are recommending rank to be shown both on the sleeves and on the lapels, and whether badges reflecting qualifications and inservice courses attended

should be on both sleeves or one only. We also liked the designs you submitted for medals and campaign ribbons, but were uncertain about some of the details in your colour-coding scheme. Some of my colleagues thought that your proposals for showing previous service in above-average or below-average schools, as objectively measured by national league tables, might be a trifle complicated for less able pupils to understand. (I should like to take this opportunity, by the way, to stress that my colleagues and I are passionately committed to promoting high standards, quality excellence and above-average access and performance for all pupils.)

## **2 Teacher retention**

We liked your suggestions for ROTPLA, Raising the Teaching Profession Leaving Age, and agree that there should be widespread participatory, interactive and collaborative public consultation on whether the new retirement age for teachers should be 75 or 80. Could you please give us further information on the research you have done which suggests that approximately 15,000 teachers, when they hear of the proposals, will have heart attacks and drop down dead? As you may know, a distinguished educational researcher, Mr Christopher Woodhead, has discovered that 15,000 teachers in this country are incompetent. My colleagues and I would be *extremely* interested to know to what extent you think these may be the same 15,000.

## **3 School improvement and underclass control**

You estimate that 25 per cent of the population is surplus to requirements. Our own estimate is that the figure is closer to 30 per cent. Either way we agree that the term 'underclass' describes this section of the population with helpful clarity and that the existence of so many surplus children poses special challenges for the education service. Your idea of taking underclass children out of schools and containing them in Pupil Reformation Units seems basically sound, and we should like further details on logistics. The acronym 'PRU', however, is not feasible, since this term is already in use for a different purpose. 'PRC' is possible, since we are ending Premature Retirement Contracts (*vide supra*), and the concept of Pupil Reformation *Camp* is in any case preferable.

Your suggestion that ships moored off the coast could be used for school improvement purposes, by accommodating pupils who are surplus to the requirements of mainstream schools, is of great interest to us. Do please send further details about costs and value for money.

## **4 Aims of education and expansion of key stages**

We accept your suggestion that teaching and learning at each key stage should be governed by the same specification of generic educational aims, and that the aim at each stage should be simply stated as: 'to prepare

pupils for the end of key stage tests'. The expansion of the key stage scheme, along the lines you propose, will be a matter of great priority for us. There is fuller information in the enclosed paper.

Briefly, this is what is proposed. There will be three further key stages after key stage four, to be known, not terribly imaginatively, as key stages five, six and seven. Seven is already sometimes referred to by Ofsted as the PD stage. Normally, in educational circles, the abbreviation PD stands for "post-Dearing". In this instance, however, it is pre-death.

The scheme is also to be expanded downwards. Key stage minus one is for nursery schools, to prepare pupils for baseline assessment before entry to infant schools, and key stage minus two will run from birth to nursery school. It will culminate in the award of a CPVE - Certificate in Pre-Voucher Education. Key stage minus three will last almost exactly nine months, and will involve, both for instruction and for monitoring and evaluation, the use of electronic tagging.

Politicians and theorists are currently discussing whether key stage minus four should be introduced, the stage immediately before conception, but are currently unable to agree how long this stage typically lasts.

## **5 Classroom-level private sector partnerships**

My colleagues and I are passionately committed, as I'm sure you are aware, to raising the morale of the teaching profession and enhancing the esteem in which teachers are held by the general public. To this end, we like your idea of re-naming all teachers as Cost Centre Managers, and requiring each teacher to be responsible for raising sponsorship funds from the private sector to finance his or her own salary, and the cost of textbooks and chalk.

## **6 Management development programmes for headteachers**

Your ideas are excellent. Please send details about your innovative work.

I had written about two programmes which have recently been trialled. The one is known as FASH, an acronym which means For Ambitious Secondary Heads, and the other as FAPH, For Ambitious Primary Heads. I'd just like to mention at this point how sad I find it that some people nowadays are terribly negative and cynical. You may not believe this, but when they heard these terms, FASH and FAPH, one person thought they were abbreviations for, respectively, Fascist and Faffing About.

Really, isn't it sad, when people just mock and criticise and don't suggest anything constructive themselves? Postmodernism has a lot to answer for, if you ask me. Just the other day, I was cycling through the early morning mist on my way to Holy Communion - it's something which we C1s and C2s do quite often, in fact it's the reason we have bicycles - and I suddenly thought, postmodernism has a lot to answer for. And cultural relativism. Don't talk to me about cultural relativism. And as for ethical relativism, words

fail me, no really.

Any way, the point about both FASH and FAPH is that they are soundly based on schools effectiveness research and on close examination of successful school improvement measures. The advice to ambitious headteachers goes like this. First, administer a battery of tests to your intake. Choose tests which were standardised on a population markedly different from the population of your school, and which are culturally irrelevant or (ideally) nonsensical for large numbers of your pupils. The archetypal item in all good tests is this: 'Which is the odd one out in the following list – average, normal, acceptable, minority?'

You may have at your school, I tell headteachers, some teachers who are quite humane, generous, good-natured and child-centred. That's all right, I try to reassure them, such staff have their uses. But keep them well away from the testing. Instead, put in charge of the testing your most short-tempered, ill-mannered and child-unfriendly staff, and administer the tests at a time of day (late morning is particularly suitable) when both staff and pupils are at their most fragile and uncomfortable. Mark the tests with great rigour.

Through these various ways you will ensure that the profile of your intake is beautifully depressed when compared with national norms. You will have a splendid baseline in consequence from which to proceed. ('Baseline': the line between deserving pupils, those who will succeed at your school, and base pupils, the villains who are going to fail and who must not be allowed to contaminate the others, or contaminate your own ambitions to be known as a successful headteacher.)

Then, over the next few years, remove as many low-attaining, base and villainous pupils as possible, for example by expelling them (this will involve first provoking them into aggressive behaviour – not at all difficult, as you and some of your staff no doubt already know), or by persuading their parents to take them elsewhere. Replace the pupils you get rid of with high-attainers, those who deserve to achieve. Your results in due course ('outcomes') will show that you have added phenomenal value to your intake, that your school therefore is 'effective', and that you yourself deserve now to move to a really good and influential job as an inspector or government adviser.

## **7 Bedtime stories and narrative assumptions**

We welcome your suggestion that the government should send the text of an approved bedtime story by email to each school each day, and that pupils should take print-outs home to their parents for use later in the day. We agree, of course, that the stories should be carefully written but are not entirely confident that we understand the distinctions you draw between omniscient, permissive and self-referential narrative styles, or between original sin and original blessing. If your essential point is that children should be taught by bedtime stories each evening that they themselves are ignorant, uncivilised and evil, and that narrators should never, never, never draw attention to their own storytelling tricks and techniques, since to do so

would be to foster politically correct postmodernism and cultural and ethical relativism, then most certainly we agree with you.

The letter from the minister, or whoever, summarises some of the messages to the classroom from the conventional wisdom of our day, as reflected in the voices of politicians desperately anxious to reassure Middle Britain of two things. One, that the so-called underclass (whatever its size) is under control, and will not riot and threaten Middle Britain's security, status and property. Two, that paid-up members of Middle Britain need have no fear of slipping into the underclass themselves, for the purity of age-long distinctions is being lovingly maintained, and the impermeability of age-long boundaries is being zealously patrolled.

*We shall overcome, some day.*

What message do we have in reply, here today, from the classroom? Let's turn, for preliminary guidance, to the literature put out by Loony Left Associates Limited. 'Dear Friend,' they write:

Dear Friend

Thank you for your enquiry. We enclose some papers about our concerns and current projects, and a brief reading list to show where we're coming from. If, having read through the enclosed papers, you feel that we could help you, please contact us. Yours etc.

An examination of the papers sent by Loony Left Associates Limited suggests that the beginning of wisdom, in the context of this conference, lies in the assertion that all teachers are fools but some are more foolish than others. All are regular, standard, main grade, common-or-garden, run-of-the-mill fools. But some - including most or all people attending this conference, I should imagine - are mega, they're like seriously silly fools: folly specialists, fools with folly leadership and coordination responsibilities. Let us consider further this preliminary distinction, between main grade fools on the one hand and folly leaders on the other.

Regular folly has three aspects:

- (1) Foolishly considering that the utterances and proposals about education of most politicians and journalists are, simply, mad.
- (2) Idiotically living with, not avoiding, the fact that politicians and journalists believe that most of the ideas held by teachers are mad - ideas about children, language, schooling, class, ethnicity, gender, culture, justice.
- (3) Ridiculously, oh so totally ridiculously and dementedly, grounding your beliefs in daily contact with, and constant listening to, the young. It's utterly crazy, loony, loopy, daft, to spend your working life with children and teenagers, for they neither read newspapers nor vote in general elections.

The role of folly leaders and coordinators is to nurture and strengthen those three pieces



of madness. It is to frame and therefore focus the madness, mobilise it, articulate it, keep it alive and well and ready, keep it active, keep it powerful for when its time comes. This contribution to the NATE conference draws now towards a close with seven points which feature, in effect, in the job descriptions and person specifications of folly leaders, of serious fools.

First, they engage in symbolic acts, they communicate through gesture, ritual and performance. Act first, argue later. Shoot from the hip first, not the head -

Pozzo: Well, would you like him to think something for us?

Estragon: I'd rather he'd dance, it'd be more fun?

Vladimir: I'd like well to hear him think.

Estragon: Perhaps he could dance first and think afterwards, if it isn't too much to ask him.

Vladimir: (*to Pozzo*). Would that be possible?

Pozzo: By all means, nothing simpler. It's the natural order.

But second, thinking is important as well as dancing. 'A fool with a heart and without brains,' says Mrs Yepanchin to her daughter Alexandra in Dostoevsky's *The Idiot*, 'is the same sort of unhappy fool as one with brains and no heart. It's an old truth. I am a fool with a heart and no brains, and you're a fool with brains and no heart. We are both unhappy.' A seriously foolish teacher needs to think and know and understand. About learning and schools and childhood, of course, and enough mathematics to be able to take apart lies, damn lies and league tables. And essential facts and realities about inequalities and outrages in our society. ('It's justice, stupid.')

Third, the heart. The happy fool, Dostoevsky's character was asserting, has a heart as well as brains. (Happiness, yes, though this is by the way at the moment, is a virtue, it's an essential requirement in a mega fool's person specification. More on this point later.) Having a heart involves passionate solidarity with and affectionate time for the little ones, the dispossessed and unpossessing, the wretched of the earth. It involves also levelling with emperors and with emperors' representatives, as court jester, as Christ before Pilate, as the Hans Andersen child who saw and spoke to the poor, bare, forked animal beneath all that smothering imperial apparel. "Some of my best friends," says the seriously silly fool, "belong to Middle England focus groups; some appear to be in a persistent vegetative state; some, let me tell you, are headteachers or deputy heads or heads of department. But all are, indeed my friends, I level with them, I'm not put off by their apparel, I haven't given up on them, I believe in them."

Fourth, fools are pranksters, tricksters. Mullah Nasruddin in Turkey and Central Asia; his Effendi counterpart in East Asia; Kweku Ananse the spider in Ghana and his relatives in Togo, Nigeria and the Caribbean; Tortoise throughout Africa; Hare in western Africa and her cousin Brer Rabbit in the United States; Mr Punch on the beach, the Clown in the circus and pantomime, Chaplin and Harpo Marx on the screen: they all have genes in common, so to speak, there's a family likeness, and they all draw on the same repertoire of tricks. They deceive, lie, cheat, con, sting, scam, seduce, and they are admired, treasured and adored, sometimes worshipped, in homes and hearts, markets and streets, pathways and yards, all over the world.

Who admires tricksters, and why, and when? Tricksters are quick-witted,

resourceful, and always eventually bounce back; frequently they have the last word and the last laugh; they move out of everybody else's frames and interpretations, and re-frame, re-focus, re-interpret, the landscapes and scenarios, and political addresses, of common sense. They confront and expose the folly of the strong, the powerful, the serious, the conventionally wise. That's why they are admired and adored. They're admired by, basically, people without power, in situations where to confront power directly and explicitly would be to court defeat. They are icons of the ever resourceful, the ever defiant, the ever bouncing back, human spirit.

Tricksters run the constant risk, true, of being dismissed as real conpersons, real cheats, real seducers. And they run the risk of actually becoming and being these things - real conpersons, real cheats, real seducers. So yeah, they're icons of the human spirit.

Fifth, a point already touched on. Fools are on the side of the powerless. They spend their time with the powerless, rejoice to suffer the little children, live out the creed that small is beautiful. They are nurtured and inspired by the worm's eye view.

Sixth, fools send themselves up as well as the wisdom the world. They re-frame commonsense and its political addresses, in order to expose their folly. But also they re-frame themselves, they move out of their own frames, you never know for certain where you are with them, or where they are with you. It's scary, the way they problematise their own performance. But it's hope-inspiring too. For if the frames round performance itself are uncertain then so, gloriously, is everything: the political world must be transformable too, justice may be realisable. It's justice, stupid.

Justice, said an ancient prophet, comes as the morning star, its dawn is as sure as the sunrise. This is the seventh attribute of fools. They cheerfully believe that the good times are bound to come, their dawn as sure as the sunrise. Fools are happy, therefore. 'Don't know where, don't know when,' some of them say, 'but we'll meet again, some sunny day.' Some fools, though, do specify when and where - 'next year in Jerusalem'. Follykind has many formulations of this assurance. 'We shall overcome' is of course another.

But wherein exactly lies the folly here? It is not in the discourse about tomorrow, the utterance that a totally sunny day will come, with the healing of the nations and the perfect union of two persons. It is in the action today which utterances about tomorrow legitimate and energise. The folly, the absurdity, lies in ever bouncing back, the refusal to feed on the carrion comfort of despair.

The clown, the tortoise, Mullah Nasruddin, the spider, the hare, Harpo Marx, these are icons of folly, of absurdity. So also is Sisyphus, to all eternity trying to get that boulder up that hill and never - *never* - reaching the top. 'His passion for life,' says Camus, 'won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing.' Camus watches Sisyphus close to the boulder, and also Sisyphus walking down the hill when the boulder has slipped from him, and he's on his way to take up again his remorseless chore.

'At each of those moments when he leaves the heights,' says Camus, 'he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.' And: 'he concludes that all is well. This universe seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night-filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself towards the heights is enough to fill a human heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.'

*La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir le cœur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux.*

The fool is happy, *heureux*, blessed, in the right place.

Message from the classroom? It is fourfold: teachers are co-creators of culture; teachers are in the justice-creation business; teachers know and nurture the young; teachers are artists, with the curriculum as script and themselves as both scriptwriters and performers.

*Some day.*

That letter I received before I set out today. 'Lack of clear direction', 'inconsequential and opaque asides', 'exhibitionist recourse to obscurantist irony', 'several errors, as the lecture developed, of taste and judgement culminating in a quite serious transgression of decorum and convention – I refer to your decision to take all your clothes off', 'impish flippancy betokening misuse of power and responsibility', 'clumsy use of the tricks, arts and tomfoolery of a seducer'. And 'anti-climax at the end'.

The letter was intended as summative, but has maybe functioned as formative, assessment.

But yes. Yes. No. We shall. Some sunny day. The healing of the nations. Not be moved *Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux*. Enough to fill the heart of humankind. Next year in. Fourfold message. Dawns like the morning star. Limitless dare-devil hope.

It's justice, stupid. Script.

Frame on, we shall, frame on, deep, frame on, over, we shall, frame, come, frame, we shall, some day.