

The Unfinished Business of Evolution

Some modest proposals

Address to a conference organised jointly by the Humanities Association and the Development Education Association.

The king and the four advisers

Once there was a king whose country was suffering one long winter. He had done everything he could, he believed, to renew his people and to inject new life into the land. Many times every day for many years he had restructured, reformed and reorganised. He had put in place new initiatives, fresh starts, special measures, key innovative strategies as also key strategic innovations, and an extraordinarily large number of ten-point total-quality-management action plans.

But all to no avail. The country decayed, the people were listless, the king himself was losing faith in his own powers, the winter continued. Winter in the land, winter in the human spirit.

Then suddenly the king realised the true source of all his problems: he had been badly advised. In seedtime learn, it is said, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy. If in winter there is no enjoyment it must be that there was too little teaching in the autumn. The king had all his advisers thrown into prison and resolved to put to death his four principal advisers, those whose specialist responsibilities were respectively for spirituality, morality, society and culture. The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction, but the fool sees not the same tree that the wise person sees, nor the same tigers.

The king called the sons and daughters of these four principal advisers and instructed them to kill their parents. The eldest son or daughter in each family, he promised, would be appointed to the principal adviser posts hitherto held by their fathers and mothers, and rendered now vacant. The sons and daughters of the principal advisers took their parents away. In one family they stabbed their parents with knives and daggers and the bodies were thrown into a ravine. In another they strangled and smothered their parents and the bodies were buried. In a third they clubbed and stoned their parents and the bodies were burnt.

In the fourth instance, the sons and daughters listened to their parents' pleas to be spared. 'One day,' the parents said, 'you will need us. Do not kill us, but hide us instead in a remote village where no one knows us.' The sons and daughters of this fourth principal adviser agreed. They hid their parents in a remote village.

This story will be continued. First a few notes on how the lecture which it is introducing is to unfold. The lecture will have three parts. First, I shall reflect on the themes and meanings of the story and relate them to the context in which we meet here today, the context of humanities teaching and development education. Second, I shall reflect on the concept of identity and link it to that of equality, and again shall have in mind the context of humanities teaching and development education. Third, I shall make four modest proposals, to do respectively with being a wise teacher; marrying heaven and hell; befriending monsters; and welcoming the twenty-first century.

For a preliminary evocation of the overall subject-matter I recall some historic words about a humanities course of study written by some teachers more than thirty years ago. If we are successful in planning and teaching the course, they said, we shall have achieved five ideals:

- 1 To give our pupils respect for and confidence in the powers of their own mind.
- 2 To extend that respect and confidence to their power to think about the human condition, humankind's plight, and humankind's social life.
- 2 To provide a set of workable models that make it simpler to analyse the nature of the social world in which we live and the condition in which humankind currently is.
- 4 To impart a sense of respect for the capacities and humanity of humankind as a species.
- 5 To leave the learner with a sense of the unfinished business of human evolution.

Let's return to the king, and to his wintry land. For a while he was content with the services provided by the sons and daughters of his erstwhile principal advisers. Nothing, however, actually improved. Winter continued. He decided that he had to rid himself of principal advisers altogether. He set them an impossible task. 'I wish,' he said, 'to build a new National Palace. But it is

absolutely essential to put the roof in place before any of the supporting walls and pillars. I want the roof up there in the sky, all on its own. Advise me on how this is to be done. If you cannot, you will die.' Three of the four principal advisers despaired. But the child of the adviser whose life had been spared went to the remote village where her parents had been hidden, and outlined the absurd task. 'I have to advise on how a roof can be put in place, up in the sky, without any supporting pillars or walls. If I cannot, I shall die.' The old people listened to the problem, and explained what should be done.

A few days later the king assembled his whole court and called the advisers. 'Well,' he said, 'how is to be done?' Three of the advisers had not the slightest idea and they were led away to execution. The adviser whose parents were still alive, however, and who had been advised by them what to say, stepped forth with confidence. 'It is entirely straightforward, your majesty,' came the reply. 'You yourself, as the land's most important personage, must place the first rafter in the sky. It will then be wholly easy for the rest of the roof to be constructed.'

The king recognised that there was cunning and courage here that he needed to respect; imagination and exuberance here that he needed to tap; a refusal to despair here that could inspire and empower him. The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. The king asked where the idea had come from and the young person told him, confident that he would restore the parent to the post of principal adviser. And so it happened. The parents were brought back and for many years the king and his country were well advised. A fool, some of the advice ran, sees not the same tree that a wise person sees. Exuberance is beauty. The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. In seedtime learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy.

Was the specialist responsibility of the fourth adviser for spirituality or for morality, for society or for culture? History still has not recorded this, it's unfinished business. Just at the moment, you know, it doesn't matter. In seedtime learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy.

Images of our times

What does the story recall or suggest for us in the context in which we are meeting? It provides four main images, I suggest, of and for our times. First, in its account of the wanton slaying of elders it provides an image of the current disregard for and destruction of, the achievements and insights developed before 1988. In the late 1990s Ofsted and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority took an increasing interest in SMSC — spirituality,

morality, society and culture. But none of their documents and discourse show awareness of the pioneering work done in earlier times. Second, the story recalls the importance of waiting and hiding: of going underground rather than into liquidation. A time will come when achievements of the 1960s – Man A Course of Study, the Humanities Curriculum Project, integrated humanities, political education, and so forth – are needed again. We must keep them in good repair, so to speak, and be ready to bring them out when there is again a space for them.

Third, the notion of putting a roof in the sky without any supporting pillars and walls is a vivid image of what has been happening since 1988 in the humanities field of education. The national curriculum was laid out without any concern for overarching themes or aims. There are these ten different pillars of different heights and strengths, in different locations. It is nonsense to try to join them together, apparently as an afterthought, with a roof whose rafters are spirituality, morality, society and culture. However, our situation is that we have to live with such nonsense for the foreseeable future – it is not yet practical politics to try to make structural alterations to the edifice we've got, let alone to contemplate re-designing and re-building from scratch. Fourth, it is not sufficient merely to hide and wait. We need cunning and courage, imagination and wit, here today, every day, not just some time in the future.

National identity

From time to time there is a moral panic in the press about national identity, and about the possibility that young people are not growing up to be as patriotic and unquestioning as their elders would like. 'Children will be told lies about their history and encouraged to feel ashamed of their country,' warned a journalist on the *Sun* when the report of the Commission on the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain was published. 'Children,' says the *Daily Mail*, 'should be taught to be British – whatever their cultural or ethnic background ... The multicultural approach to education should be swept away and replaced by a national sense of identity and purpose.'

Simplistic discussion in the press about national identity is to an extent, alas, licensed by careless use of polemic and rhetoric in speeches by leading educationists. To cite a single example, a speech a few years ago by the then head of the Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority, now the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, seemed seriously to suggest that the only alternative to promoting national identity is 'some kind of watered down

multiculturalism' and that there are many teachers who believe that 'there is no more need to teach Latin than Sanskrit, classical civilisation than the history of the American West, Milton than Mills and Boon, Christianity than New Age cults.' There are too many teachers and teacher educators, the speech alleged, who have been influenced by relativism and postmodernism. Traditional moral values, it claimed, 'have been pushed aside by an individualistic, relativistic and hedonistic view of morality previously associated with the underclass but which in the twentieth century has been taken up and promoted by the intelligentsia in its attack on bourgeois values.'

This simplified portrayal of teachers and of contemporary thought (and also, indeed, of the so-called underclass!) occurred in a speech in which there was no reference to concepts of political literacy and competence, and no discussion of concepts of social justice, participation and democracy. To discuss notions of national identity independently of political competence, and independently of the structures of inclusion and exclusion in which such competence may or may not be exercised, is to risk collusion with the crassest kinds of authoritarian rule and thinking. In due course, it must be hoped, the QCA will provide on this subject the kind of moral and intellectual leadership which teachers of humanities, and all other teachers, need and deserve.

The world as a whole, and also each country within it, can be described as a community of communities. Every community has its own cultural markers, its own stories about the past, its own resources and power. But the boundaries between communities within the overall community of communities are frequently fuzzy as distinct from hard and fast: there is frequently a no-person's-land, in-between space or grey area between them, for it is possible for one person to belong to two or more communities at one and the same time, and it is possible for a person to pass from one ethnic or national identity to another. Also there is much interchange, much give and take between different cultures and ethnicities. In any case the boundaries between ethnic identities are not the only significant boundaries within the overall community of communities. Also there are boundaries which criss-cross national and ethnic categories, for example those which are to do with religion, occupation, gender, age, sexuality, ideology, single-issue campaigning, region and class.

I should like to illustrate the complexity of identity by quoting from some pupils in a London secondary school who were asked by their humanities teacher a few weeks ago to reflect on their own identities by writing down six — at least six — things which were important to them:

My family. Friends. My mum. Culture. My education. African. Swing, jungles, R and B music. My life. My attitude. Black History.

My education. My black history. My basketball all around. My attitude. I want people to know that I ain't no joke.

Sociable. Good listener to people's problems. Studious. Kind, nice. My family. Cheerful.

Such self-descriptions evoke the Russian-dolls or concentric-circles notion of belonging. This involves picturing smaller and more local loyalties nesting inside those which are larger and wider — there's a progression through family, street, neighbourhood, community, region, country, continent, the world. They recall too, however, that the Russian dolls model is in all sorts of respects unsatisfactory. A London teenager's black skin, for example, criss-crosses all those circles, linking the individual to a distant continent more swiftly and more solidly than to places which are geographically much closer. But also, there are conflicting loyalties and obligations exist *within* each circle, doll or layer, even — or especially — in the bosom of one's own household: 'I want people to know that I ain't no joke.'

All of us experience tensions and hybridities in our upbringing and in our sense of self. All of us, as we go about our daily lives and as we face the future, are a mixture of here and there, of belonging and not: we are all hybrids. We have to make choices amongst and within the heritages to which we have been born, and in which we take part. Such choices are made within certain parameters and constraints, of course. They are nevertheless real, and therefore have to be periodically renewed and confirmed, or periodically critiqued, changed or discarded. The issue is not only what to choose but how to choose it, and how to live with choices once they have been made, and how to keep them in good repair. How to picture and value 'the Self'? How to represent and anticipate 'the Other'? These are the key questions.

'There's no safe place,' observed Marina Warner in her 1994 Reith Lectures, 'from the injuries of history; home as a place or a time of innocence can only be an illusion.' referred to the Caribbean poet Derek Walcott, who 'doesn't recover the bitter past to serve present grudges — his acts of remembering, his quest for identity, are grounded in generosity.' In its broadcast version, this was the last lecture's last word, 'generosity'. The lesson taught by Walcott, Marina Warner concluded in the printed version of her text, as also by other great writers of modern times, is that 'no home is an island; no homegrown culture can thrive in permanent quarantine. We're all wayfarers

and we make our destinations as we go.’ In her final paragraph she cited a remark made by a character in Walcott’s version of *The Odyssey*, ‘We earn home, like everything else’. And the lecture and the whole series of lectures ended thus:

Walcott doesn’t mean paying the rent or the mortgage. He means taking part in the journey, using memory, imagination, language to question, to remember and to repair, to wish things well without sentimentality, without rancour, always resisting the sweet seduction of despair.

In Marina Warner’s terms, a curriculum for national identity is a curriculum for ‘taking part in the journey’. The journey moves from a past which needs repairing as well as merely remembering, and which requires exercise of the imagination as well as the memory. It stretches into a future in preparation for which the curriculum in schools needs to be without either sentimentality or bitterness, and to be building hope not despair, sweetly seductive though the latter may frequently be.

Modest proposals

I am going to make four modest proposals, to do respectively with teaching and learning in school classrooms, the role and responsibilities of lecturers at conferences such as this, the marriage of heaven and hell, and welcoming the twenty-first century.

William Blake in his proverbs spoke of the dignity of teaching. In seedtime learn, he said, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy. Our bodies are fed in winter by the products of the autumn, themselves dependent on seeds sown in the spring. Our spirits, in the winter seasons of our living and lives, are sustained by what, in an earlier season, we have taught and shared, imparted and transmitted: what we have sown, tended, eased and nurtured. But what is teaching? Is it primarily and archetypally calcium sulphate and disquisition, vulgarly known as chalk and talk, or is it essentially something else? Everyone at a conference on humanities and development education knows that indeed it is something else: if we wish our classrooms to communicate the four components of citizenship experientially, as surely we do, we have to go further, much further, than calcium sulphate and disquisition, and than its latterday manifestation, overhead projectors and worksheets. Here is a rehearsal of, a touching base with, what we all of us here already know:

Being a Fabulous Teacher: an aide-memoire

This is the way that you learnt.

This is the wisdom that underlay
the way that you and I learnt.

This is the talk and speak and say
encoding the wisdom that underlay
the way that you and I and she learnt.

These are the games and tasks, projects and play
empowering the talk and speak and say
encoding the wisdom that underlay
the way that you and I and she and he learnt.

These are the objects to handle, models to make
for the games and tasks, projects and play
empowering the talk and speak and say
encoding the wisdom that underlay
the way that you and I and she and he and we learnt.

These are the viewpoints and give-and-take
through objects to handle, models to make
for the games and tasks, projects and play
empowering the talk and speak and say
encoding the wisdom that underlay
the way that you and I and she and he and we and they learnt.

These are the minds and these are the hearts
trading viewpoints and give-and-take
through objects to handle, models to make
for the games and tasks, projects and play
empowering the talk and speak and say
encoding the wisdom that underlay
the way that you and I and she and he and we and they and everybody
learnt.

These are the links between the parts
joining together minds and hearts
trading viewpoints and give-and-take
through objects to handle, models to make
for games and tasks, projects and play
empowering talk and speak and say
encoding the wisdom that underlay
the way that you and I and she and he and we and they and everybody and
everyone learnt.

These are the stories again and again
weaving links between the parts

joining together minds and hearts
trading viewpoints and give-and-take
through objects to handle, models to make
for the games and tasks, projects and play
empowering the talk and speak and say
encoding the wisdom that underlay
the way that you and I and she and he and we and they and everybody and
everyone everywhere learnt.

These are the lives of loving and pain
known through stories again and again
weaving links between the parts
joining together minds and hearts
trading viewpoints and give-and-take
through objects to handle, models to make
for the games and tasks, projects and play
empowering the talk and speak and say
encoding the wisdom that underlay
the way that you and I and she and he and we and they and everybody and
everyone everywhere ever learnt.

The marriage of heaven and hell

Let's hear it for hell, said William Blake, prophetically addressing humanities teachers at the start of the twenty-first century: let us commend and celebrate hell as well as heaven — energy, passion and imagination as well as reason. For 'without contraries is no progression'. Blake was confronted by the cold rationality of the Enlightenment much as we nowadays are confronted by the cold, dry, shrivelled, shrunken dregs known as the National Curriculum for England and Wales. Some of his proverbs of hell were woven into, and were commented on in, the story with which this lecture began. They include: In seedtime learn, in harvest teach, in winter enjoy. A fool sees not the same tree that a wise person sees. Eternity is in love with the productions of time. Exuberance is beauty. Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead. The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. The tigers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.

We are called, then, to be heaven and hell marriage guidance experts. Amongst other things this requires connections across the curriculum. With cunning and courage, and with wit and imagination, we have to maintain open, impermeable, fuzzy boundaries between so-called subjects. We must frequently seek out and sojourn in, and meet and work and play with colleagues in, no-person-lands and grey areas. There are borderlands within the humanities — between and amongst history, geography, economics, sociology, anthropology and politics — as also, of course, between humanities

and other clusters of subjects.

Befriending monsters

'In front of me,' says a character in a story by Anton Chekhov, 'are a hundred and fifty faces, all different from one another, and three hundred eyes staring straight into my face. My aim is to conquer this many-headed hydra.' He is a famous Russian scientist who frequently gives university lectures. 'If I never allow their attention to slacken for a moment during the whole of my lecture, and at the same time never talk above their heads, then they are in my power. My other enemy is within me.' The enemy within, he says, is the chaos of his knowledge, which he has to shape and order 'in a form that is accessible to the hydra's mind and is capable of exciting its attention.' He remarks that 'at one and the same time I have to be a scientist, a teacher and an orator; and it's a poor outlook for me if the orator gets the better of the teacher and scientist, or vice versa.'

The lecturer at a course or conference, like the user of calcium sulphate and disquisition in a school classroom, is a hydra-facer, and is looking at both a hydra outside herself or himself and at a hydra within. My modest proposal is that humanities teachers and development educators need to study and analyse, and equip and empower themselves with, the skills of hydra-facer. The world's myths and folktales tell us, with a remarkable consistency and consensus across centuries and continents, that slaying monsters doesn't work — if you slay them, as you think, their heads and their evil ways multiply. The only successful way of dealing with monsters yet discovered, in the course of the unfinished business of human evolution, is to befriend them.

Welcoming the twenty-first century

A fourth and last modest proposal: let us welcome, not ignore, not disdain, not dread, the new twenty-first century. On the last day of the last century, Thomas Hardy stood at a gate near his home, gazing at the dregs of winter around him. The wintry land, with its sharp pinched features, was an image for him of the corpse of nineteenth century civilisation and culture. 'The ancient pulse of germ and birth,' he said, 'was shrunken hard and dry, and every spirit upon the earth seemed fervourless as I.' Suddenly there burst forth into the countryside's and society's and his own spirit's winter the song of a bird, a thrush, who chose to fling his soul through caroling upon the gathering gloom of the late December afternoon. The song seemed mysteriously hopeful, as if the thrush was refusing to succumb to, in the closing words of Marina Warner's

Reith lecture, the sweet seduction of despair:

So little cause for carolings
Of such ecstatic sound
Was written on terrestrial things
Afar or nigh around,
That I could think there trembled through
His happy good-night air
Some blessed hope whereof he knew
And I was unaware.

We too feel unaware. But for us blessed hope *is* written on terrestrial things. What the thrush knows (frail, small, gaunt, *aged* — my italics) is that the twenty-first century is going to see a massive explosion of assertiveness and creative self-definition amongst billions of people all over the world. There will be a great quantum leap into, or anyway towards, a new community of communities.

Our business through the twenty-first century will be, as our business now is, the unfinished business of human evolution. As we look forward, and as we look round, let us teach and learn with minimum use of calcium sulphate and disquisition. Let us wish ourselves and each other many civil and ceremonious solemnisations, and many delightful and fulfilling consummations, of the marriage of heaven and hell. Let us befriend monsters, within us and before us. Let us welcome the twenty-first century. Let us, in the current wintry season, enjoy.