

A Journey of a different kind

I had the fortunate experience of being invited to supper by the CEO of the 'Prue Leith' school of food a couple of years ago. The Odd Plate restaurant is a wonderful place to relax with friends and the food is scrumptious. The good food facilitated a wonderful conversation about education, I am a teacher and he was in-charge of a school of sorts, training chefs to prepare starters that explode with flavour.

Murray Barnetson, has always been amazed by the wonderful way in which the young men and women of today exude a maturity and pride that he does not see in his own generation. Chefs are notoriously dictatorial in the kitchen – their underlings either do it their way or are side-lined and peel carrots for the rest of their careers. Murray was asking, how good schools seem to be able to get their senior students, particularly, to feel comfortable with not being dictatorial and autocratic. How have we generated a culture of mutual respect that has encouraged the youngsters in our institutions to be innovative thinkers who feel they can make a difference?

Kitchens, I suppose are very much like schools, the Head Chef, like the teacher is trying to impart his 'so called' superior knowledge to the 'learner chefs'. The more experienced the chef the more respect he deserves, or so he thinks. If your recipes get published in a book, surely you must be a 'guru' and as a result others will want to listen to you, be shouted at or berated by you under the guise of 'learning'.

To be honest, this conversation made me think deeply about what we have done at schools to ensure that we are developing student leaders who are self-starters, who think for themselves and who do not rely on power to enforce a way of thinking.

E M FORSTER WROTE: The people I admire most are those who are sensitive and want to create something or discover something, and do not see life in terms of power...they produce literature and art, or they do disinterested scientific research, or they may be what is called 'ordinary people' who are creative in their private lives and who always help their neighbours. I believe in the aristocracy of the sensitive, the considerate and the plucky. Its members are to be found in all nations and all classes, and all through the ages there is a secret understanding between them when they meet. They represent the true human condition. They are sensitive to others, as well as for themselves. They are considerate without being fussy, their pluck is not swankiness but the power to endure, and they can take a joke.

The people Forster admires most are those who, in my opinion, have learnt to lead themselves first before they endeavor to lead others. They are those in our society who have embarked on a journey of life-long learning. Perhaps this is the answer to Murray's question around the dinner table. At Oakhill School both staff and students have been willing to embark on a journey, a journey of self discovery. Keith Coats in an article entitled 'The Attitude and Action of Authentic Leadership' writes: 'Journeys are not conceptual things or the matter of theoretical discussions for if they remain such, they are not journeys.' I have spent many days on the St Alban's Grade 10 Journey which, in itself, is a physical journey of over 400km but it is far more than just a physical journey, it is a social, emotional and spiritual one as well, and it is symbolic of what we, as educators, consider to be essential in our journey as humans toward discovering who we really are. Life's journeys are not only marked by fulfilling experiences but by endurance, pain, and the reality that you will get lost at some point along the path.

So, why do we think that we are getting it right at Oakhill when it comes to training leaders? The point is that we don't. We don't think we have some magical formula and that in itself is empowering. We want to learn from others, and most of all we want to create an environment where we can learn from the students in our care. Alvin Toffler, in his book *Future Shock*, says: 'The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read or write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.' Perhaps the fact that Oakhill is only 17 years old, has allowed us to be open to change. We are in that fortunate position that we are not bound by the traditions of the past, not that we are adverse to tradition but it does not dictate how we embark on our journey.

I have had the good fortune of traveling around this country and the United Kingdom to visit schools and to engage with others regarding educating those in our care and it continues to strike me how reluctant some schools are to share their good ideas. It reminds me of the 'Level 5' leadership that Jim Collins talks about in his book *Good to Great* where he claims that the main traits of being an effective leader are 'professional will' and 'humility'. Perhaps humility should be explained in terms of openness: open to new ideas, new information, and new ways of doing things and most importantly open to learning and being a learner. Perhaps that brings me back to the beginning, to my conversation with Murray Barnetson. Here I was, a mere teacher sitting with the CEO of a world renowned Chef training institution and he was asking me how his company could learn from ours. He really wanted to learn and I should learn something from that simple fact. Jim Collins suggests that training leaders needs to take the backseat to 'character development' if we really want to prepare young men and women for life. Focusing on the process of nurturing the exciting talent that comes through our doors must pre-empt the magic formulas we come up with. If we at Oakhill want to prepare others for an ever changing world we need to

continue our journey of learning, particularly our learning from the exciting young talent who arrive on our doorstep each new-year.

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