

Cum Laude Address Delivered by Tom Batty April 18, 2024

Intro

As a head I used to keep 8 to 8:30 a.m. free for the boys to come and see me. No appointment necessary, just wander in and chat.

In my last year, a lad in his final year, so 17 or 18 years old, wandered in. He was in some distress. He told me he had thought long and hard about important matters and had many good ideas he wanted to share and see implemented, but none of his peers would agree with him.

I listen, took a bit of time, and said “Haven’t you worked it out yet?” To which he replied, “Worked what out?” “That we are all bonkers,” I said.

We carry this stuff around in our heads that only we know about; our personal thoughts and internal conversations; *our* life in *our* mind. And we do this while trying to make some sense of all we observe and those we observe it with.

To add spice, there is paradox: We all crave our own personal freedom, but we are quite willing to restrict the freedom of others to get it.

We know that we have something unique to offer; we want our moment in the sun, but we are also conscious that the group can do things the individual can’t and that we can gain from this; that our quality of life is a product of the quality of lives of all around us, near and far.

But this brings restrictions to our freedom: the need for common codes, laws, and regulations. How do we find balance?

We sense when the balance when right: art that transcends culture to tell of our condition; song that inspires the soul; literature that moves us to tears; scientific advancements that reduce suffering; social advancement that leads to respect and dignity; mathematics that simultaneously thumps the heart and hurts the brain; rising to meet your mate’s cross to header the ball into the back of the net; or as I was on Saturday, hugging the stranger next to me at the Gtech when Brentford scored to get their first win in 10 games.

But we also know that when the balance is wrong it can be disastrous: anger; prejudice; greed; repression; persecution; bigotry.

Do the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the one or the few? Or are the needs of the many best served by protecting and advancing the needs of the one or the few?

How do we find balance between all that is going on in our minds and all around us?

How do we advance as a member of a community doing our bit, while living an original life?

This is what I want to explore this morning. I'll do it through four stories—stories I shared with the young man over subsequent weeks.

Story 1: Why do we bother with school?

I'm going to take you to the Tiwi Islands at the top of Australia, about 10 miles north of Darwin.

I was there because the school I ran in Melbourne, Australia, was seeking a partnership with the Tiwi elders at their emerging school, Tiwi College.

The elders felt they had lost a generation to drugs and alcohol and were determined not to let it happen again.

An elder told me they had established health facilities, housing, employment opportunities in forestry and fisheries, and that what they now needed was a school to instill a culture of participation.

I nodded. He held my gaze. "There is no Plan B. If the school fails, it all fails."

The first reason we educate each generation is to inculcate a culture of participation; to pass on all we and previous generations have learned so that in each generation young people have the capacity and desire to take control of their own lives; to contribute to the greater good. We want to skill you up to do your bit. I refer to the participation reason for education as the Good. For the greater Good.

But the Good is not enough.

We also need to cultivate in each generation the ability and confidence to advance beyond their line of sight. We need to advance.

I doubt that on this side of the Pond John Wyndham's great novel *The Day of the Triffids* makes a set text, but it's worth a read.

Having been blinded by meteorites and hunted down by huge people-killing plants, small communities of survivors are holed up behind electric fences to keep out the Triffids. As they plan for rebuilding society and the skills they will need, one of the key characters notes this:

“If we focus solely on the skills we need to make a living without allowing time for thought, then knowledge stagnates and people with it.”

You see, along with the skill acquisition, we also need people to think originally.

In my Eton boarding house I had a young lad, Theo, who thought differently to most and mostly about different things. We got on well. Theo reckoned that the best thing Eton taught him was how to write a B grade essay in 30 minutes.

He kept in touch when at university, and one day sent me a note: “Sir, you will like this comment from my tutor for an essay I submitted.” The comment: B (of course); “At times Good and at times Original, but the good bits aren’t original and the original bits aren’t good.”

We need both the Good and the Original.

To do this, we seek to unearth passions and hone mastery so being interested in things and striving to get good at them become habits for life.

We know interested people make for interesting people, so we seek to surround you with interesting people who have their own passions and mastery to share—your wonderful teachers and, of course, you have your wonderful parents.

But beware. We older folk have a habit of thinking we are right. And wanting to prepare you for success in our world. Knowing we won’t get it again, we can be jealous and wary of youth, and seek to embed your thinking with our conflated political complexities, forgetting what really matters. From Keats:

*How can I, that girl standing there,
My attention fix
On Roman or on Russian
Or on Spanish politics?*

*Yet here’s a travelled man that knows
What he talks about,
And there’s a politician
That has read and thought,
And maybe what they say is true
Of war and war’s alarms,
But O that I were young again
And held her in my arms!*

Or, more succinctly from Snow Patrol: “*Forget what we’re told before we get too old.*”

And things don't stand still. And they are on the move again. And this takes me to Story 2.

Story 2: If you want original, hire a human

About a year ago I was out for a jog. When returning over the bridge from Eton to Windsor where I now live, I bumped into a former maths department colleague, Simon, from Eton.

I like Simon and I needed a rest so happily got into conversation.

We got onto AI in education and I made the point that AI would struggle with all the human niceties.

Simon shrugged in that polite but dismissive English way, and asked if I'd seen the recent paper—from a US university I think—in which AI was challenged to solve the most human problem the researchers could construct.

The AI's solution was to hire a human and solve the problem. The person not ever knowing they had been hired by AI.

Much of striving for the Good, the passing of skills, is achieved by passing on set knowledge for a set test and a set rank of qualification. And seeking to do this in differentiated manner best adjusted for the capacity of each student in our care.

Are we still the dominant species to do this? If so, for how long? I think I know Simon's answer.

Originality is a much harder beast to define, measure and control.

We can't just wake up one morning and think, "I know, today I am going to learn how to have an original thought." To think originally, we have to live originally: we need those passions and that mastery, and we need awareness of all around us, near and far.

Awareness of our human gifts—those we have received and those we pass on. Gifts as put by the great Welsh poet, R S Thomas:

*From my father my strong heart,
My weak stomach.
From my mother the fear.*

From my sad country the shame.

*To my wife all I have
Saving only the love
That is not mine to give.*

To my one son the hunger.

If we have these gifts, this hunger, why is it so hard to live an original life?

Well, it often requires us to leave the comfort of the known. There is vulnerability in seeking one's own path.

But the reward! This from Steinbeck who I'm sure would make your set texts.

Sometimes a kind of glory lights up the mind of a man. It happens to nearly everyone. You can feel it growing or preparing like a fuse burning toward dynamite. It is a feeling in the stomach, a delight of the nerves, of the forearms. The skin tastes the air, and every deep-drawn breath is sweet. Its beginning has the pleasure of a great stretching yawn; it flashes in the brain and the whole world glows outside your eyes.

It is a lonely thing but it relates us to the world. It is the mother of all creativeness, and it sets each man separate from all other men.

If it relates us to the world, how does everyone else fit in with our journey?

Story 3: Feel it where I kick you

The first time someone really stopped me in my tracks and made me focus on cause rather than effect, I was age 10. A visitor to our primary school told us that the most significant trend for our generation would be the movement of people. That it would be people traversing continents in search of a better life that would most determine the landscape of the coming century. Within months of his visit, events in East Africa changed the ethnic makeup of my class and that of my town of birth.

Amongst those arriving was Tejinder with whom I shared a love of mathematics and who introduced me to chess and origami.

Tejinder got me thinking: "Do we learn more from those who have had similar lives to us or from those whose stories are different?"

In my early 20s I took up karate. My training partner was Steve, whose family hailed from the Caribbean. I was okay at karate, sort of average. Steve was good. Very good. He had this wicked side kick to the stomach that I just couldn't block.

You know when people are really good at something in sport because although you know what they are going to do, you can't stop them doing it.

They have mastered quality. Quality, I concluded from Robert Pirsig's novel, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, is what exists in that instant of time between observation and judgment. That moment where the micro and macro meet; the individual free exploring mind and the impact of the wider community; the romantic and the rational; the moment when intimacy meets culture; the instant where gifts influence habit and source originality.

Steve invited me to his wedding. At the reception there was great music thumping from the biggest bass speakers I had ever seen.

I was out on the dance floor giving it my best shot when Steve came over and yelled in my ear: "It's true what they say—you blokes really can't dance, can you? You're all shoulders and arms. You've got to feel it right there, where I kick you."

And you know what, he was right.

I learned from Steve that our greatest resource in the quest is each other. And that—whilst it might come with a degree of initial disorientation—what we learn from each other's differences enhances our own rhythm for life and search for quality and thence originality.

Story 4: The \$150,000 answer

One of the many joys of being a headmaster was that I got to interview young boys for a scholarship capable of providing access to an education that would otherwise be beyond their families' means.

In my final scholarship interview, I met a quirky, shy 12-year-old boy, hoping with his mother for that twist of fate that changes a life's course. It was not long out of COVID, and his face seemed all glasses and mask as he fidgeted on the couch.

I asked him whether he thought it more important to do the right thing or the kind thing.

He paused looked about the room wistfully and replied, "The kind thing."

"Why?" I inquired.

And he told me: "*Because, when you do the kind thing, you know in your heart it's the right thing.*"

Some people, whatever age, just see it clearly, and that's a fitting place for me to draw this to an end.

What have I offered you?

That we are all bonkers; that you should revel in your youth; that the future is to live an original life; that our greatest resource in harnessing our gifts and establishing the quality to do this is each other; and that kindness is the guide to getting it right.

In short: that the privilege of a lifetime is being who you are; and the challenge is working to discover just who that could be for the benefit of all.

That's what I leave you with.

Oh, and to keep the sun on your back and the wind in your hair while you still have some.