

***Fanning the flames of wonder – why teaching is the most important job in the world***

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It is a great privilege to be asked to speak to you tonight, and I am very grateful to Tom Mae for the invitation.

Let me start by acknowledging we are on the land of the Dhawaral people, and acknowledge their elders, who have been passing on knowledge in this area for hundreds of thousands of generations through song, dance, art, story...knowledge that has always been purposeful, to be a guide for action in the world. Knowledge that is essential not only for physical survival, but also for thriving socially, culturally, and spiritually.

Aboriginal elders were, are, and will be, the keepers and handers on of knowledge that is necessary to understand the meaning of the world and one's place in it, how to adapt oneself and one's community to the world, as well as how to adapt the world to yourself and your community, knowledge about how to be, how to act, how to live a good life.

In fulfilling this role, Aboriginal elders were, and remain, **teachers**, for this is the role of teachers. It is an incredibly important responsibility.

This role of teachers - in helping young people discover themselves, and the world and then how they can shape the world is "Why teaching is the most important job in the world." But it is also the most important job FOR the world. I'll say more about what I mean by that later.

And because teaching is so important, good teachers will always aspire to be the best teachers they can be. You will be open to learning, you will aspire to excellence, and constantly be thinking about ways to improve your practice.

But while improvement always involves change, change does not always involve improvement. Some change can make things worse. We need to be able to assess when change is positive, and when it is negative.

Unfortunately, we live in age where, in order to demonstrate one's cleverness, speakers at events like these feel compelled to pronounce upon the future of education with great authority, and no speech seems complete or credible unless it includes some version of the cliché that because the world is changing rapidly, we need to change with it, because change is inevitable, etc etc. There are few thoughts more banal or commonplace, and unfortunately the education sector is not immune from banality.

So I intend to offer absolutely no insights into what needs to change about teaching. I will certainly not be uttering anything so depressing to teachers as to suggest that your role is more accurately described as being a “learning facilitator”, or a “guide on the side”. You are **teachers**, and there is **no profession** that is **more noble** and **more important**. No other occupation offers as many ways to help others learn and grow in their most formative years and take responsibility for their own lives.

So instead of talking about how teaching needs to change, I want to talk about five aspects of what good teaching has always been, is now, and **always** will be. The more likely threat to good teaching is not that it fails to change, but that its central and enduring features will be forgotten or eroded or dismissed as somehow “old-fashioned”.

These five aspects are not special in any way. They don't represent an exhaustive list. They don't form any framework or system. They are simply five things I consider need to be recognised as important. You may well have a different list of five. The first I have already mentioned: great teachers are always open to learning and improvement.

In relation to the second, perhaps a way into this topic is to go back to the recent past, to 1983, when I was training to be a Jesuit, and I spent some time working at a school in Adelaide, where I was given the opportunity to do some teaching for a term. At the end of my time there, the crusty old Irish Jesuit Dean of Studies gave an assessment of my efforts. “There are two types of teachers: popular and successful. You were popular.”

Six years later, in 1989, I was employed as a teacher, my first proper job. I taught Year 7 and 8 in Melbourne. I don't recall getting much advice from my colleagues as I prepared to teach my first class, but the one piece of advice I do recall was “Don't smile for the first three weeks.”

It's worth taking a few minutes to unpack the distilled wisdom of experience in these comments. Obviously old Father Barden didn't mean to say all good teachers are unpopular. He himself was well-liked, but he wouldn't admit that.

I think both he and my colleague were trying to tell me that my relationship with my students is fundamentally a professional one, and that the measure of a good teacher is the learning that takes place, not whether the teacher is friendly or liked. A good teacher will be respected. Their relationship with students is not primarily a personal one or one based on friendship. This is second aspect of great teaching I want to highlight.

That is, good teaching does not depend, as friendships usually do, on compatibility or preference and the relationship is not one of mutual support. This is the basis of, and the rationale for, professional standards. This is the basis for ethical practices relating to your dealings with your students.

A professional role has boundaries; it has clear objectives and purposes. You will judge your forms of interaction with your students according to the standards of the profession, and the objectives implied in being a teacher.

That is not to say teaching is not intensely personal. It involves human interaction all the time. Effective teaching **is** relational, **not** transactional. It is not limited to

transmission of subject knowledge, and at its best it deeply involves the growth of the whole student as a human being.

Certainly great teaching involves having a good relationship with your students, but those good relationships are based on trust and expertise, on being fair, on being reliable, being a person of your word, being a person who provides structure and consistency in order to provide a classroom environment where learning can take place.

These are things that are often missing from the lives of many of your students outside the classroom, and from their home lives, even in the wealthiest of households.

In particular, as your students observe you as you try to handle even the most vexing situations with even-handedness, with professional poise, with concern for them and their ability and right to learn, and with sensitivity to the personal issues which might be informing difficult behaviour, they come to respect you as a teacher with something to offer that they need and want, living up to the highest standards of your profession.

Yet it is true that often, the realities of the classroom and the school seem light years away from such elevated visions of teaching. Rowdy kids, unsettled Friday afternoons, outbreaks of bullying, encounters with parents who are either too demanding, or not demanding enough – all these occur and place far more immediate challenges on you. Teaching is a challenging profession.

But you have discovered that it is often **through** these experiences, not **in spite** of them, that you find the way to relate to your students professionally that puts their needs as learners at the forefront of your concerns. So, a great teacher is respected for providing a structured environment where learning is possible.

Many of us, in choosing to become teachers, would have been inspired by great teachers we had at school, people who showed they were committed to our intellectual and personal development by the way they taught. In particular, it was their deep knowledge and passion for their subject that was inspiring. This is the third dimension of great teaching I wish to highlight.

I had a number of such teachers, but one stands out in particular. His name was Kevin Garrity, and he was my HSC maths teacher. He was slightly eccentric, a characteristic - some would suggest - shared by many excellent maths teachers, present company excluded of course.

When he was umpiring cricket, he used to wear a t-shirt that said "Maths is Great" on the front and had Euler's theorem on the back. When one of us took a catch, he would comment that the trajectory of the ball was that of a parabolic arc. He would excitedly point out the window when torrential rain was falling and declare "Look – a family of parallel lines!" He would take any opportunity he could to help us see how mathematics could be applied to our understanding of the world. So, great teachers are knowledgeable and passionate about their subject.

Kevin would set us particularly tricky calculus problems, and as he wandered around the room observing our screwed-up faces as we struggled with the tension of inquiry, he would often wave a hand-held fan over us. One day, I asked him, "Sir, what are you doing?" And he replied, "I am fanning the flames of wonder!".

"Fanning the flames of wonder" is the best summary I have ever heard of the role of teaching. When we are born into this world, we have no choice about our parents, our community, where and when turn up. We just arrive. And then our journey of discovery and self-discovery begins in earnest.

Andrea and I were in Canberra last weekend visiting our 14-month grand-daughter, Emma. Her parents and our other two grown-up children happened to be there as well, and it was nice to see them also.

But we were dying to see Emma to see how much she had grown physically, emotionally, socially, intellectually.

Without bias, I think it is factually accurate to say that she has the widest eyes of any infant we have come across. It's as if she is constantly being surprised by the world around her and marvelling at it, wondering at it, trying to make sense of it. It's as if she is saying "Who are you? What is this place? Why am I here? What am I meant to do with this?" She is, like all children, full of questions, and constantly trying to make sense of the world around her. It's her parents' job to help her do that, and soon it will be her teachers' job, to fan the flames of her wonder.

This is the fourth dimension of great teaching: the ability to inspire student to ask more questions, not just to answer them.

The role of the teacher in imparting knowledge is to not to satisfy a student's desire for knowledge, but exactly the opposite: it is to make them hungrier and thirstier for more, more knowledge, more skills, more understanding.

A good lesson will conclude with students knowing they have learnt something, but a great lesson will conclude with students being unsatisfied with what they've learnt, wanting to learn more, asking more questions. That's fanning the flames of wonder. That's great teaching.

And the nature of their questions will branch out into an ever-widening circle of interests and concerns. Which brings me to a fifth dimension of great teachers. They understand the wider purposes of education. What are these wider purposes?

The earliest known curriculum document was a two-word inscription on the Temple of Apollo at Delphi in Greece. It read simply "Know yourself". Knowing yourself and examining one's life in a systematic and fundamentally honest way, so as to become wise, this is the most profound outcome of a successful education.

Once called 'character education' this notion tended to carry the sense of compliance with a set of extrinsic and perhaps socially shaped behaviours. But developing in your students a commitment to thoughtful, honest, purposeful human agency, respectful of others and embracing the common concerns of one's communities, this is indeed the wider objective of your calling as a teacher: to help young people come to know themselves and the power they have to change the world.

In December, Education Ministers will consider a new version of the Declaration on Educational Goals for Young Australians, known as the Melbourne Declaration, signed over 10 years ago. From what I know of the process, I don't predict any change in the high level statement of goals, namely that our school system should promote both excellence and equity, and secondly, that it should produce young people who are successful learners, confident and creative individuals, and active and informed citizens.

I think right now there is a particular need to focus on the third of these: active and informed citizens. Why do I say this?

As a result of advances in technology, we now have access to more information than ever before. But this access has not ushered in a new Age of Enlightenment. Rather it has helped fuel a surge in narcissistic and misguided anti-intellectual egalitarianism that has crippled the possibility of informal reasoned debate on all manner of public issues. It's as if, because we have so much information, we don't value it properly, just as communities that have plenty of water don't seem to value it appropriately.

There are so many facts at our disposal, we feel free just to choose the ones that fit our prejudices, and not bother with asking the question as to what, ultimately is true and good.

In light of these events and the thoughts they gave rise to, I have come to the view that our standard way of referring to the purposes of education – usually some version of a trope that says we need to impart the knowledge, skills and attributes that students need to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century – is in danger of not only becoming a stale cliché, but of also lulling us into a false sense of security whereby we do not **pay sufficient attention** to the **most** profound changes taking place in our society and therefore focussing on the **most** important thing we need our education system to do.

It used to be that to describe someone as “educated” meant that a person's innate talents, interests and desires had been cultivated, enhanced, refined, deepened, broadened and developed with the help of elders and experts in a variety of disciplines who understood that learning was as much about **attitudes** as aptitudes. Now the term “education” connotes in the popular mind something much thinner – a process of acquiring skills and knowledge that will make us employable.

For many educators, particularly those advocating a stronger focus on general capabilities or transferrable skills, the main priority of schooling is the **individual's** ability to adapt to the new technological revolution so as to be able to work in the as-yet-unknown jobs of the future. While gainful employment is important, it is not the

only object of education. The state of our collective, democratic way of life, is an equally important reason to bother with skills such as communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking.

And it is also why we need to bother with a knowledge-rich curriculum. While post-modernism has led to many important insights about power and ideology, a damaging aspect of its legacy has been the undermining of the importance of factual and cultural reference points. The undermining of the solid ground of reality upon which individuals can base their own solid sense of self and community and of their own agency in a world that is knowable, a world in which things can be true or false, represents a serious threat to our democratic society. It also represents a threat to people's mental health as they confront a world of meaninglessness and find themselves standing on the edge of a bottomless abyss of relativity.

This is the backdrop to the current review of the Melbourne Declaration. It is now more than a decade old, and in need of revision. Why? Not because the overarching goals have changed, but because the social, economic, cultural and global context within which the education system is now operating has transformed in ways could not been foreseen in 2008.

For a start, consider the major event of 2008 that signalled change on a global scale. On 15 September 2008, the fourth largest investment bank in the world, Lehman Brothers, filed for bankruptcy, triggering the global financial crisis.

The Melbourne Declaration was signed two months later by all Education Ministers, but there is nothing in it that displays an awareness of the seismic shift in Australia's social and economic situation that had just got underway.

But arguably even more significant than these events of 2008, were the events of 2007. In 2007

- The first iPhone is sold
- Facebook (in late 2006) opened its platform to anyone with an email address

- VMware software company goes public – it's the software which enables any operating system to work on any computer and is the foundation of cloud computing
- Hadoop Software is launched, providing a free, public, open-source framework that enabled multiple computers to work as one – the foundation of big data
- Google launched YouTube and its own operating system Android
- IBM launched Watson, its cognitive computer
- Netflix streamed its first video
- The mysterious Satoshi Nakamoto launched the Bitcoin phenomenon off the back of blockchain technology
- Twitter split off on its own independent platform and went global

Each of these events on their own were significant, but collectively they arguably represent the biggest technology inflexion point in history since the invention of the printing press, the steam engine, or the electric light bulb.

These two events – the Global Financial Crisis and the Great Digital Revolution – continue to shape the context of Australia's education system.

So it is timely for us to recommit to the goals of education in all its economic, social, cultural and personal dimensions.

We were once referred to as “the lucky country”, and then we wanted to be “the clever country”, but more than ever what we need to become is “the wise country”. We should be asking about how education develops wisdom, because that, above all, is what we need it to deliver now.

Our education system engages students within a given tradition of culture, of language, thought, and structure, but it also opens the way to new questions and new formulations that will keep that tradition alive, as something that continues to grow is alive.

An education system that functions out of this ideal will be high performing because it honours students' questions. Questions and inquiry arise when human intelligence and wonder - the eros of the human spirit - attend to the movement of life as experienced. When teachers and others responsible for education fan the flames of wonder, we help students to tune in to the experience the world, to ask their own questions about it, to articulate in some form their insights, to critically assess the truth of those insights, and to act responsibly upon them.

So great teachers:

1. are open to learning and improvement;
2. are professionals who are respected for providing structured environments where learning can take place;
3. are knowledgeable and passionate about their subject;
4. inspire more questions and fan the flames of wonder; and
5. are these things and do these things so as to provide students with hope and the opportunity to contribute creatively to the world in need of transformation.

When you do these things well, your conversations with your students about knowledge and the world under construction will flourish from the creative and critical thinking of a new generation of lifelong learners who understand that they have minds, and that they can use them responsibly for the common good.

That is what great teachers do, and why teaching is the most important job in the world.