

Friday 19 November 2021

Dear everyone

“I crashed the car over the precipice,” is an interesting metaphor for answering challenges to standards in public life.

Dr Claire Foster-Gilbert, founding director of the Westminster Abbey Institute, knows a thing or two about standards in public life. She has given evidence to the Parliamentary Standards Committee on what a code of conduct looks like (Feb 2021), and writes more profoundly in her article ‘Public Service Institutions: Custodians or Stiflers of Spirit?’ published in a little red book (not that one) called *Integrity in Public Life*.

It is the subtitle, ‘custodians or stiflers’ that draws my particular attention, as this dichotomy can ring true of schools. To what extent does the business of school stifle? Certainly, the business of exams and assessments, that very thing that is driving parents into dark pits of anxiety, can be stifling. How do we dig ourselves out of that hole?

In her article, Dr Foster-Gilbert starts with an account of a story by Peter de Rosa, *The Bee and the Rose* in which the worker bees are suppressed by the utilitarian demand to be productive. Bobby the bee meets Rosa the rose, whose pollen he has been collecting, and she challenges his institutionalized beliefs. Among other things, she challenges Bobby to have fun. What is fun, he asks? “Fun,” she explains, “is doing something because you like doing it and for no other reason”. Bobby’s response is one of puzzlement. How, then, in having all that fun, will the honey get collected? “Why are you gathering all that honey?”, she responds.

Dr Foster-Gilbert moves the narrative into a deeper analysis of the relationships between individuals and organizations, with the unfortunate habits of institutions to shift inspiration and ideas inexorably towards policy, deadening governance and from there to the spreadsheet where ideas can be measured and risks averted – all utterly crushing of the human spirit, and, she suggests, “switches off people’s moral sense.” A particularly Whitehall style which leaks into much of organizational cultures.

When they work well, institutions capture the sense of individual integrity that makes up the whole, recognizing that we are recipients of the spirit of previous generations, but also add to it, suggests Dr Foster-Gilbert. Our Dean, Dr David Ison, makes the same point about the School, that we are all part of its history and our work here echoes towards the next generation. That moral sense must inform who and how we are, without being stifling.

In the meantime, post lock down there is still the relentless commitment to a knowledge economy ordered and managed in front of the computer screen: ‘left foot, right foot’ as one parent described the experience of work to me the other day. Education, if we’re not careful, can begin to feel like that, too, and is deadening for children.

There is another way. This week I heard a talk by Professor Kersti Borjars, Master of St Catherine's College, Oxford. She makes the point that part of a great education is to be comfortable with not knowing, and that the key is to find good questions. At St Paul's Cathedral School, this year we are focusing our attention as educators on framing good questions and paying attention to the feedback. The very best questions don't always have one answer, and that is the poverty of assessments and tests for children, in particular those used for entrance examinations which have the unpleasant character of being too binary. That's a serious problem because it sets up a tension between child, parent and school.

And here's the bite. Parents, literal and *in loco parentis*, are, child psychologists tell us, one of the biggest sources of anxiety transfer to children. Here on our sceptered isle we're not alone. Here's an interesting web site from the USA

<https://childmind.org/article/how-to-avoid-passing-anxiety-on-to-your-kids/>

And a piece from *India Express*

<https://indianexpress.com/article/parenting/family/how-can-parents-avoid-passing-their-anxiety-to-their-children-7232692/>

Philip Larkin, that now deceased sourpuss commentator of life, has it that 'Man hands on misery to man./ It deepens like a coastal shelf.'

Clinical Psychologist Oliver James, borrows the second line of Larkin's poem *This Be The Verse* for his book about family life. The blurb on Amazon asks: Do you feel trapped by your family's expectations of you? Does your life seem overwhelmingly governed by jealousy or competitiveness or lack of confidence? Questions that I have no doubt beleaguer both young and old.

This is all a bit bleak, but then Oliver Burkeman in the *Wall Street Journal's* essay this week claims, "Certain forms of busyness can be delightful", with the caution that "the problem with trying to make time for everything that feels important is that you definitely never will".

And you know what people say, if you want something done, give it to a busy person. The more you fit in, the more the goal posts shift, says Burkeman. Like Bobby the bee, we dutifully press on with what needs to be done. This is a thing. And it has a name. It's called The Efficiency Trap. Imagine the phrase said in one of those booming elongated voices used to announce block buster movies coming to a screen near you soon. **The Efficiency Traaaaap!** Burkeman advocates a different approach. Focus instead on what's truly of greatest consequence and learn to live with the feeling of being overwhelmed by stuff we haven't done.

Burkeman writes from a position of deep knowledge: he has been in the business of solving busyness for years. Yet he has found it wanting. I am willing to bet at some point you will have been asked to align your core values with behaviours and the mission of your firm (jumble up the clauses and/or words in more or less any order, and it all comes to the same). Burkeman describes trying to do this and aligning them to his daily goals. "Using these techniques often made me feel as I were on the verge of ushering in a golden era of calm...but it never arrived." He ends with the wisdom that there is no better management technique than facing things as they really are.

I'm not a fan of joke sayings on mugs, they tire quickly, but this one I remember.



Fill it with tea, and have a cuppa with your friends and family. That email, the WhatsApp message that has to be answered to stoke the fires of outrage...all in its own time, or not.

Here's John Agard in a wonderful parody of tea drinking.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lt-viSIQ6oc>

And if I ever get to be invited to be on Dessert Island Disks, this will be coming with me.

Learn the dance and do it together.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5IsSpAOD6K8>

Have a good weekend. Monday comes soon enough.

Simon