

What matters most

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Parents of Emmanuel College know that I have jealously guarded the front page of the College newsletter during my time as Principal. I have lost count of the number of parents who tell me, “I always read your newsletter article”, or “I always make my husband read your article”, or “Thank you for your newsletter pages - we always read them as a family.” My thanks to those parents, for their kindness.

I have also greatly appreciated the ones who added, “But I don’t always agree with you!” I’ve often replied by reminding them that I frequently try to be confronting and to create discussion through this page. How dull to be so boring as never to excite people into an exultant “Yes!” or an angry “No!” What is the point of writing a school newsletter that everyone just nods at, and scans in case it might contain something important?

I have never hidden my real purpose in writing these pages:

- a)** To encourage those who really want to build strong family life and values to go on with that noblest of all tasks, despite whatever opposition they might feel from society at large;
- b)** To urge Emmanuel families to sit up and re-examine society and life, as a result of a sharp or striking turn of phrase, or a statement that is a little bit ‘on the edge’ – and to critique our society where I think it needs to be poked and prodded;
- c)** To simply and clearly show that the Christian faith, properly understood and well lived is true, vital and simply makes good sense. It is well supported by historical, literary and sociological evidence. It is not in conflict with science. Those who sneer at it and make cheap jokes on TV talk programs generally show their ignorance of genuine scholarship and academic research. To acknowledge Jesus Christ as the Lord of all life is the only pathway to true peace, joy and light.

I’ve always been an educator who doesn’t quite fit into his profession. I hate and loathe educational jargon. I have no time for those ‘education boffins’ in universities who have confused Education with Teaching. I get cross when young teachers tell me, “But we were never taught how to teach in our Education course!”

I refuse to use language such as ‘critical pedagogy’ or ‘enhanced learning outcomes’ or ‘differentiated curriculum’. I prefer to use simple language. I have ensured that our school reports are written in language that parents can understand. Apart from technical concepts which properly require specialised language, if you can’t explain something in the common language of the man in the street, your right to a platform should be questioned.

Most non-technical things worth knowing are really quite simple and basic. Most big and important ideas need only small words, such as love, truth, goodness, faith, wisdom, honesty, hope, promise, family...

My philosophy of teaching has always been very simple, and an essay based on it would most likely fail a university Education subject. Nevertheless, here’s my likely-to-fail essay summary: A teacher must (Yes, ‘must’ – not perhaps or could or might or any of those other weasel words so loved by cautious academics):

- a)** Know their own subjects well, have many things in their minds and on their shelves or computer files worth teaching, and be passionate and confident about them.
- b)** Believe that children must be taught before they can learn, and thoroughly equip themselves to be a source of wisdom and discernment, unafraid to teach.
- c)** Be so confident of their right to teach that they refuse to allow a student to sleep or daydream or ‘muck about’ while they are teaching.
- d)** Be a critical observer of cultural trends and pressures on young people from all kinds of media and popular trends, and be prepared to be the one to declare that a current, popular emperor is stark naked, even if the whole world seems to be admiring their fine appearance. (I hope you have read to your children the story of The Emperor’s New Clothes. It is one of the finest fairy stories in the canon.)
- e)** Be convinced that most young people will be inspired by notions of beauty and truth, if they are engagingly presented, and be prepared to promote them at the same time as decrying ugliness.

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I'm well aware of the notion that education is commonly described by experts as 'facilitating the learning process to develop the independent learner'; that teachers are taught to get out of the way, and allow students to learn at their own pace, or to learn together, in 'collaborative communities'. I like to shock trainee or first year teachers by telling them that I have no use for teachers who want to make students independent learners. A truly independent learner is bound to be either ignorant or arrogant and probably both.

I deeply desire '**dependent**' learners in my student body. I want students to know that they cannot rely just on their own opinions, flawed logic and limited horizons to discover truth. If we do not stand on the shoulders of those who have gone before, we are bound to repeat their mistakes. I would know very little if I did not constantly draw on the wisdom and learning of hundreds of writers and speakers from whom I have learned, and on whom I depend for my constant inspiration. For over fifty years, I have made it a life-practice to read old books and new books, as often as I can, as many as I can.

Of course, in this age no single person can possibly know all there is to know about a single subject, and the internet is a fertile place for wide reading, viewing and learning without external assistance. The computer has certainly changed the face of education. But we all know that for every piece of useful information available through the internet, there are tens of bits of nonsense, and dozens of sites that will be destructive or distracting. Skills of discernment and critical thinking are essential in navigating the web.

Despite the trillions of gigabytes available digitally, I am still committed to the notion that there is a role for teachers as elders, as specialists, imparting wisdom to young minds and hearts, inspiring them with the joy of learning, introducing them to new and old ideas through science and literature.

Good schools do not merely educate minds. Human beings are complex creatures, with wills, emotions, desires, longings and memories. People often learn best when they learn from other people, because their learning is nuanced by real humanity in all of its complexity.

The Hebrew word for **education** is the same word as that used for **consecration**. A really genuine education will ultimately give back to God (i.e. consecrate) the child who is becoming an adult, so that he or she might truly serve God and humanity in grateful response for the gift of life and truth. The curriculum will include the academic subjects, to be sure, but it will also include moral

teaching and the development of self-control, wisdom and the reverence of God who is always primary, eternal and transcendently other than all human beings.

This is why I left the State Department of Education, way back in 1982. I decided that I could no longer devote my life to teaching in a system which only recognised part of the real world. Educating children in a world that ignores the spiritual component of life is like sitting down to a fine dinner, only to discover that despite the crystal glassware and lovely table setting, the chef has removed the meat, vegetables and fruits from the menu. All that is served up is seasoning, sauces and spices. The tastes are piquant, exciting even, but you finish up malnourished and deeply hungry.

I have interviewed thousands of young people who have completed their primary or early secondary years in other schools and have fitted this description perfectly. Thankfully, we have managed to *Emmanuelise* most of them in their remaining years!

Long-time parents of Emmanuel College will recognise that the ideas in my book *What Matters Most* are not new – they have appeared time and again over the years in my weekly front page. This book is written in response to many, many requests to create a publication of the various newsletters and speeches that I have written over the last 18 years.

I first set out to do that, simply by reproducing those items in a topical order, but it quickly started to appear very repetitive. So, rather than just create a compilation of those newsletter pages, I have chosen instead to write what amounts to a compendium of those ideas, organised in a way that will allow some thematic treatment, but avoid too much repetition.

Along the way, there are extracts printed from actual newsletters just to support or fill out what is written in the text.

What do I hope will be achieved by this? I have a very clear purpose in mind. *I hope and pray that families, and individuals in families, will be encouraged to never give up the quest to nurture their individual and their family life in the light of three great enduring aspects of human life: Truth, beauty and goodness.*

We live in an age where all three of these are under constant attack. Since these have been my constant focus for 18 years of newsletter writing, I have structured the book under the three headings of **truth**, **beauty** and **goodness**, subdividing each one into some of the eight values of the Emmanuel Compass, though not in this order:

“A really genuine education will ultimately give back to God, the child who is becoming an adult.”



Compass used with the permission of Emmanuel College.

Truth: Faith, wisdom and integrity.

Beauty: Hope and compassion.

Goodness: Self-control, courage and justice.

Truth

The idea of an absolute, definable truth has been replaced by a general public belief that every person's opinion is equally valid. Ask any Year 9 or Year 10 student, and you will probably hear a version of this: "Well, everyone's entitled to their own opinion. No-one has the right to say that they are more right than anyone else. It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere." You'll also commonly hear this viewpoint on commercial current affairs or breakfast programs – because they are generally aimed at a Year 9 or 10 intelligence level. Unfortunately, I know that some of our parents will also hold some version of this statement at their practical, daily living level.

Of course, such a statement is half true. But the trouble with things that are half true, is that they are also half false. Everyone is entitled to their own opinion, but not every opinion is equally valid. I am entitled to think that the world is flat if I want to, but my opinion is not in any way valid when subjected to some critical analysis. It might be my opinion, and I might be entitled to it, but that opinion is just plain wrong. What is more serious, if I choose to live within its worldview, I will have to suffer the consequences of its falsehood.

If you try applying this "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you are sincere"

system to any number of practical life situations, it will quickly become evident just how weak the argument is. Try applying it to the management of traffic on a highway, the practice of medicine or engineering, or the daily practice of a personal situation such as marriage. It will quickly become apparent that such an approach to life is not only foolish, but also dangerous – it does not work at any practical level.

In 2006 the Merriam-Webster Dictionary chose the word, **truthiness** as its Word of the Year. Truthiness was defined as the tendency to prefer concepts or 'facts' that one wished were true, rather than those that are known to be true. This is a thoroughly (post)modern concept. I have spent a professional lifetime declaring words of truth because I believe in truth. And I believe in truth because I believe in God.

Beauty

Beauty has been under attack since the turn of the last century. It started in the world of art, when artists such as Marcel Duchamp deliberately distorted reality. See, for example, his "Nude Descending a Staircase". The destruction of language followed. George Orwell predicted the current decay of language, and wrote about in his novel, *1984*, and in a number of essays, notably, "Politics and the English Language". (Find a copy of this – it's available online – and read it.) Orwell was greatly distressed by the misuse of language for the purpose of destruction of truth and beauty.

Politically-correct language now has become the norm. No textbook dares to use the word "Man" when talking about the human race, but must use words such as "human" or "humankind". Even translations of the Bible and church liturgies have opted to abandon "man", "woman", "Father" with bland expressions of greyness.

Listen, for example, to a policeman describing a murder or assault on the TV news (It will probably be called a 'crime event', and precede the discussion of 'weather events'). He will undoubtedly say something like this: "A male person was apprehended earlier today. The male person has been taken into custody, along with another female person, who was also at the scene, and will also face charges." What he means is that a man and a woman were arrested.

Since the late 1980s, the cult of the Ugly has become almost universal. The world of fashion has promoted deliberately-torn clothes, piercings of every imaginable part of the body, and clothing labels (e.g. FCUK) and T-shirt designs deliberately

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exploiting ugliness and crassness.

Architecture, landscape design, advertising have all followed suit to remove any sense of soaring beauty and inspirational design and encouraged grey conformity and an appeal to the lowest levels of common life. Can you imagine medieval cathedrals built by modern architects with their acres of grey concrete? Contemporary comedy is almost unimaginable without the constant dropping of F-bombs and other crudities.

Goodness

As for Goodness, well, it barely rates a mention. Who would want to be a 'goody two shoes'? If goodness is not being trivialised, it is usually sneered at by clever people wearing torn jeans on television talk shows. In 2011, at the Senior School Presentation Night, I spoke on this topic:

If the Age of Reason (the 19th century) was ushered in by the bloody French Revolution, it was just as surely ushered out by the bloodiest century ever (the 20th century) and replaced by the age of No Meaning (the 21st century). We are

confronted by the paradox of how the clothing company Diesel can make a fortune out of a marketing campaign that says "Be Stupid".

In a deliberate attempt to de-construct historical meanings of beauty, truth and goodness, the Diesel Wall in Berlin displayed this artwork.

As an educator of young minds, I have tried to value goodness and promote it in every way that I can in the life of a school. I don't mean that I have tried to be good. That is a matter of morality. I mean that I have tried to value the idea of goodness, not just being good.

In my book, *What Matters Most*, I set out what does matter most to me as a teacher, as an educational administrator, as a parent, as a human being. Also, I hope that this book might inspire others who may not have the same opportunities for public comment and influence as I have had, or who will have it in years to come because they are at the beginning of their careers, but who nevertheless desperately want to train their children and their community in the promotion of these core values: Truth, beauty and goodness.

I believe there is no more profound impact on a society than the cumulative, generational effect of family life well-lived, where fathers and mothers nurture children in compassion, endeavour, enthusiasm and hope, to work and pay taxes, and to honour God in the whole of their lives. **TEACH**

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Editor's Note

The author, Graham Leo, retired at the end of 2013, after 18 years of service as Principal. The Emmanuel College Board of Directors believed that Graham's greatest legacy was the school's culture developed, to a large extent, through his newsletter articles and speeches as Principal over that time. They requested that he author a book incorporating much of that material. This article is a slightly adapted version of the introduction to Graham Leo's book, *What Matters Most*, which was published by Emmanuel College in 2013.

It is Graham's sincere hope that the contents of the book, might be useful to parents, teachers, principals or pastors as a compendium of advice, including social commentary, instruction on family life, and common sense applications to schools, families and the Christian faith.

The book is available from Emmanuel College, by emailing epartridge@emmanuel.qld.edu.

