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Trash, treasure and trivia

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A question to ponder

Are teachers hoarders? (I must admit to being a culprit for too many years.) Has the study in your home been taken over by subject syllabi, curriculum materials, books, archive boxes filled with activity sheets, science experiments, project materials, videos, and ‘who knows what’, all of which, like some amorphous mass, over time, somehow made its way into the spare room and then out into the garage — competing for space with gym gear, bikes, table-tennis table, canoes, and empty flower boxes, with vehicles needing to be parked outside on the driveway? Worsening the study’s space shortage is your current take-home workload: The pile of essays that have to be marked the unwieldy collection of research tasks that are spread over the study floor and demand assessment.

You have my sympathy. Al-Jahiz, an Arab scholar from Basra is reported to have been killed by his own library when it fell on top of him. Imagine it: One’s own resources becoming an excellent teacher’s undoing!

Perhaps by nature of their pursuit, teachers — like hamsters — tend to acquire and keep all sorts of things, not for a ‘rainy day’, but to enrich the learning of their current and future students.

Virtually none of this applies to 21st Century, digitally empowered teachers. Happily, they are not burdened by three-dimensional archaic educational ‘luggage’; their resources consist merely of the latest lap-top computer and an array of mini-peripherals. It’s literally ‘pie in the sky’ stuff, true! All storage problems are now solved. All resources can be parked in ‘The Cloud’. The sky is no longer the limit, but part of the solution.

But, for ‘seasoned troopers like myself’, there is the question of what to do with the accumulations of the past that have become part of one’s life. Wisdom literature says: “To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven” (Eccl. 3:1, KJV). So, recently I decided to make a start on some ‘house cleaning’ by deleting emails, files and folders on my computer, and then progressing to drastically thinning out, or entirely removing rows of Manilla folders in filing cabinet drawers. My efforts ended with removing material from two steel cupboards; the terminus being two

bins — filled — to be collected by the recycling truck.

Initially I dreaded the task, but instead of a chore, it became a serendipitous journey down memory lane, as I sifted trash from treasure. My attention was ‘captured’ by interesting items and material. These brought to mind experiences that had left indelible impressions on me, and caused me to reflect on the ‘richness’ and diversity of teachers’ lives.

Here are several ‘treasures’ that I would like to share with readers. I would encourage readers to construct narratives of notable experiences or events from their own teaching journey. This can bring significance and meaning to our lives and teaching ministry.

Two different letters

I re-read David’s letter from Bougainville. It conveyed the good news that the boxes of library books and the donation of money had arrived safely. David and his wife Denise, both indigenous to Bougainville, had returned to their home island from Pacific Adventist College (where I had initially worked with them), after the Reconciliation Process had been initiated in 2000 with the PNG Central Government in Port Moresby.

It shared how with local teachers, helped by both villagers and the Home and School Association, they had begun to rebuild the Rumba School near the ruined provincial capital of Arawa.

The rebuilding was tough going, as noted on a visit earlier that year. The results of the civil war were evident everywhere: utter devastation, and almost total destruction of the island’s socio-economic and physical infrastructure. But the local church community did not want another generation of unschooled children. They were people of faith and hope. They trusted in God and did everything possible to make the future brighter.

The second letter had been written from an Australian prison. V.O., the inmate had drawn a crest at the top of the page that boldly announced: “In God We Trust.” He wrote that, after serving more than ten years of a ‘life’ sentence, his application for parole had been refused. His discouragement was understandable. As part of a

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prison ministry team, I came to know V.O. and had taken him fishing; including a meal at our place, as part of 'day leave'. Why had he been turned down? I wondered.

The parole officer later enlightened me regarding the situation. Years earlier, V.O.'s murder victim had been a teenage girl. The discovery of her body (with cigarette burns on the abdomen) in a shallow grave had led to V.O.'s conviction. But there was now more. The prisoner had been on day leave recently with another family. Subsequently, the authorities intercepted correspondence to the family's young daughter. Its content raised 'red flags' for psychologists. It seemed to be a case of *déjà vu*. Was the hand-drawn crest a forlorn pious hope, or a useful symbol for projecting a false persona, evidence of apparent impending recidivism?

The two letters were windows on the human condition: All human beings, without exception, are flawed, broken and daily in need of God's grace. Ours is the choice: To accept grace—changing and growing — or to reject it.

Mistaking one thing for another

This vignette 'grew' from a bundle of material about a government inquiry. Section 5. (i) sought a response in terms of "the philosophy underpinning the teacher *training* [italics supplied] courses (including the teaching methods used, course structure ...)."

My comments/observations, in retrospect, were somewhat terse. I felt the use of particular language reflected a prevailing mindset that could have far-reaching consequences for the preparation of teachers.

The distinction between education and training has long been recognised by analytical philosophers.¹ For example, we recognise that persons are not educated to operate a machine, throw a discus, or ride a motorcycle. The wider the range of learning activities, the less specialised they are, the more appropriate it becomes to speak of education. On the other hand, the narrower and more circumscribed they become, the more likely that the term training is applicable. Language is significant in shaping teaching practice, how teachers are viewed by other professions and the public. This in turn is instrumental in shaping teacher identity.

There is a danger that teacher preparation is perceived as a training exercise to provide technically skilled human resources; something like army recruits undergo. As in the case of practitioner-based research, where inquiry may be in the technical, interpretive or critical mode, some

teacher preparation may be limited to the technical mode. It should not be confined to that mode alone, as the use of some terminology would have us believe.

"There is nothing new under the sun."

(Eccl. 1:9, NIV)

Ideas from Laurie Beth Jones' book, *The Path*² are central to the vignette that follows.

Long before mission statements became fashionable, Jesus declared His, when entering human history: "the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost" (Luke 19:10, NIV). It perfectly meets the three criteria of excellence set out by Jones. Her criteria for a good mission statement, paraphrased, are:

Brevity - no longer than a single sentence.

Clarity - easily understood by a twelve year old.

Memorable - it can be recalled instantaneously.³

The formula that Jones advocates in creating a mission statement is a gem. I had taken a copy and filed it. There were three simple parts to it: The actions (verbs) that would energise the individual or organisation; their core value/s; and the cause or group that is the focus of the actions.

It's lamentable that some mission statements are uninspiring and forgettable, hybrids of glossy information and a hotchpotch of ethics. Good mission statements of Christian schools clearly and succinctly articulate their true *raison d'être*.

Interestingly, Jones also plainly differentiates a vision statement from a mission statement. Mission is the recorded reason/purpose for an organisation to exist, vision "is ... what you will have done ... It is your ideal."⁴ The apostle John shares with us Jesus' truly amazing vision statement: "that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10 ESV).

Thank you Lord for your magnanimous mission and vision, simultaneously accomplished and yet to be fully realised.

Epilogue

What trash, treasure or trivia might you come across, should you embark on a 'house cleaning' venture of your resources? Can we learn from the past to shape the future? More and more this is likely to require thinking outside the box, and for Christian teachers: To know Jesus better, on a daily basis.

Endnotes

¹ Such as P.H. Hirst and R.S. Peters, among others.

² Jones, L.B. *The path* (1996). New York: Hyperion.

³ *Ibid.* p.63

⁴ *Ibid.* p.71

“*Ours is the choice: To accept grace—changing and growing — or to reject it.*”