

Chapter 15

Reclaiming our ‘Own Selves’: Christian Religious Education and the New Junior Cycle

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Wuthering Heights is a strange sort of book,—baffling all regular criticism; yet, it is impossible to begin and not finish it; and quite as impossible to lay it aside afterwards and say nothing about it. (Chorley, 1848)

Although this review appeared on 15th January 1848, *Wuthering Heights* is a novel that continues to capture the imagination. To my mind, a pivotal moment comes when Heathcliff, after months of separation, appears in the Linton home of Thrushcross Grange. Lifting the dying Cathy into his arms, he drops to his knees and asks ‘why did you betray your own self?’ Cathy is clearly dying, not so much of a broken heart, but of a broken spirit. Her actions in cutting off Heathcliff to marry Linton are so counter personal that she destroys something of her own self. After death, her spirit is left to haunt the moors, searching for its return.

In this book – ‘impossible to begin and not finish’ – Emily Brontë captures something of the essence of the human quest. At the heart of the human condition is a search for completeness – to become our ‘own selves’. It is an insight as old as the Scriptures, true, for instance, of the Prodigal Son. Luke tells us that when the younger son has hit rock bottom, alone in a foreign land and tending pigs – an occupation abhorrent to Jews - he ‘comes to himself’ (Luke 15:17). In that dawning realisation, the younger son understands who he really is, where he is from, and yearns to go back.

In this chapter I will set out how ‘coming to ourselves’ is as central to the human search for completeness as it ever was. Indeed, the fragmented self is a well-documented phenomenon today, typified by increasing loneliness among young people and an ongoing spiritual hunger prevalent in Western culture.¹ Identity and rootedness, or, more accurately, lack of both – both personal and communal – is at the heart of this fragmentation; only by addressing who and

¹ Articulation of this phenomenon goes back at least to the 1990s. See, for instance, Rolheiser (1998).

whose we are can integration take place. This is where religious education - here specifically Christian religious education - has a clear and vital function.

Although the entire field of learning can contribute to self-knowledge, religious education has a special place in this regard. Because it is concerned with questions of meaning and ultimate meaning, it provides a particular home for questions exploring the who and why of self, of others, of the created world and of life after death. Identity and rootedness, and discovering who and whose we are lie at the heart of religious education. I will go on to describe how first disciple Andrew's encounter with Jesus presents a paradigm of the essence of Christian religious education. It demonstrates how Christian religious education, in its fullest sense, can have a transforming effect. This is significant in the context of the Junior Cycle reform. In the concluding section I will show how the integrated approach of the new Junior Cycle offers an opportunity for those charged with the education of young people in the Christian tradition to reclaim the fullness of religious education.

Lost on the Moors

Our postmodern culture is characterised by a rootlessness showing itself in a diminished sense of the past, a kind of cultural amnesia, a lostness and loneliness. With no sense of who we are or where we came from, a new isolation takes hold. For instance, in 2010 the Mental Health Foundation found loneliness to be a greater concern among young people than the elderly (Griffin, 2010). The 18 to 34-year-olds surveyed were more likely to feel lonely, to worry about feeling alone, and to feel depressed because of loneliness than the over-55s. This is problematic because of the close relationship between loneliness and mental health. Linked to increased stress, depression, paranoia, anxiety, addiction, cognitive decline and a known factor in suicide, both Paul Farmer, the chief executive of mental health charity Mind, and Jenny Edwards, the chief executive of the Mental Health Foundation, say loneliness can be both a cause and effect of mental health problems (Edwards and Farmer, 2014).

Dr Grant Blank, a survey research fellow at the Oxford Internet Institute, points out that social media and the internet can be a boon and a problem (Black, cited in Gil, 2014). They are beneficial when they enable us to communicate with distant loved ones, but not when they replace face-to-face contact. 'People present an idealised version of themselves online and we expect to have social lives like those portrayed in the media', says Sam Challis, an

information manager at the mental health charity Mind. Comparing friends' seemingly perfect lives with ours can lead us to withdraw socially (Challis, cited in Gil, 2014).

Meditation techniques such as mindfulness and apps such as Headspace, although trendy, are not necessarily helpful for isolation and loneliness, as they actively encourage us to dwell alone on our thoughts. Indeed, a 2013 study of social media at the University of Michigan found that Facebook reduces life satisfaction (Kross et al, 2013).

For Ruth Sutherland, the chief executive of Relate,² the antidote to reducing our isolation rests on laying the foundations to good-quality relationships earlier in life. But good quality interpersonal relationships depend on self-awareness, integrity, compassion, and empathy - the ability to walk in the shoes of the other (Sutherland, cited in Gil, 2014). Healthy relationships depend on these qualities - exactly the qualities that characterise the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

Spiritual Hunger

The human instinct to ask questions and the quest for meaning is nothing new. This is reflected in core parts of the current religious education syllabi at both Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate, which focus on historic and contemporary expressions of the search for meaning. But our traditional modes of searching have been fractured. Instead of guiding us down the road of long thinking, contemporary quests tend to lead us around in circles. The fallout is an acute spiritual hunger tied to a sense of desolation. Nowhere is this clearer than in the burgeoning shelf space given over to new age spirituality and self-help manuals in the all the major book stores. The 'Mind, Body & Spirit' section of Waterstones, for example, bulges with books from astrology to the occult.

Let's take for example, Oprah's Book Club. When the show concluded in May 2011, Nielsen BookScan created a list of the top-10 bestsellers from the Club's final 10 years (prior data was unavailable). The top three bestsellers are as follows:

1. Eckhart Tolle, *A New Earth*, 3,370,000 copies
2. James Frey, *A Million Little Pieces*, 2,695,500 copies

² Relate is a UK relationship counselling organisation. See www.relate.org.uk.

3. Elie Wiesel, *Night*, 2,021,000 copies (Chapman, 2011)

It is interesting that in different ways, all of these books point to the acute spiritual hunger referred to above. Take, for instance, the most popular choice: New York Times multi bestseller, Eckhart Tolle's *A New Earth: Awakening to Your Life's Purpose*. Sarah Blaskovitch of SUCCESS magazine describes it as a 'self-improvement book' that encourages its readers to live their lives in each present moment and to create happiness for themselves without emphasizing material possessions (Blaskovitch, 2008). According to Tolle, the book's purpose 'is not to add new information or beliefs to your mind or to try to convince you of anything, but to bring about a shift in consciousness' (Tolle, 2005, 6-7). He envisions a world population that is increasingly more humble, enlightened, and pure and that involves a massive change in group think. When Tolle partnered Oprah for a series of webinars based on the book, they attracted more than 11 million viewers.

A Million Little Pieces by James Frey was originally sold as a memoir but was later marketed as a semi-fictional novel following accusations of literary forgery. It tells the story of a 23-year-old alcoholic and drug abuser and his rehabilitation in a twelve steps-oriented treatment centre.

Night is the first book in a trilogy – *Night, Dawn, Day* – reflecting author Elie Wiesel's state of mind during and after the Holocaust. The titles mark Wiesel's own journey from darkness to light, reflecting the Jewish tradition of beginning a new day at nightfall. In *Night*, he said: 'I wanted to show the end, the finality of the event. Everything came to an end – man, history, literature, religion, God. There was nothing left. And yet we begin again with night' (Wiesel, 2006).

Of course, Pope Francis is acutely in tune with this spiritual hunger: 'The great danger in today's world, pervaded as it is by consumerism, is the desolation and anguish born of a complacent yet covetous heart, the feverish pursuit of frivolous pleasures, and a blunted conscience' (Pope Francis, 2013, notes 2 and 9). For Pope Francis, the joy of the Gospel, the rootedness of the Kingdom as preached and lived by Jesus, is a sure way to consolation, content and real fulfilment. Herein lies the basis of a compelling argument for religious education as a core element of the new Junior Cycle. This is a theme I will return to later.

Finding our Roots

Whatever about the extent of this phenomenon of spiritual hunger, fragmentation of self and loneliness among the young, or indeed the expression of it, the phenomenon itself is not entirely new. Some years ago Thomas Carlyle lamented: ‘But yet it is a pity we have lost the tidings of our souls . . . we shall have to go in search of them again, or worse in all ways shall befall us’ (Carlyle, 2015). One tried and tested route towards going in search of them again is that of religious education.

The world is a very religious place and Christianity is part and parcel of Irish history. It is woven in the fabric of the landscape in the form of high crosses and round towers, Mass rocks and places of pilgrimage. It holds our collective memory, for better or for worse, and seeps into the imagination of new generations. Education in this tradition is a constitutional right for those who want it. Indeed, Christian religious education has as much to offer the people of Ireland as ever, as long as it remains a choice. Emanating from a tradition holistic in focus, grounded in a positive anthropology, cosmology and sociology, it is well-equipped to speak to this spiritual hunger. At its core is the fundamental claim that ‘the joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus’ (Pope Francis, 2013). Their lives are transformed; their hearts filled with joy. Like the first disciples, those who follow Jesus are filled with joy (cf. Mk 3:14). His offer to be set free from inner emptiness and loneliness is constant.

Identity and Integration: The Example of Andrew

Jesus begins his ministry by proclaiming the Gospel – the Good News – of God. The good news is that the Kingdom of God is now at hand for all who are ready to receive it (Mk 1:14-20). There is something so compelling about both messenger and message that many who hear it leave their old lives and become disciples. For example, Mark’s account tells how the fishermen Simon and Andrew, James and John, responded to the call of Jesus. Fishermen enjoyed a lucrative business on the Sea of Galilee. In abandoning their nets these first four walk away, not only from family and the life they have known, but from security and financial gain.

Andrew is a typical example. Like many of the first disciples and many of us, Andrew is a searcher. When we first meet him in John's Gospel, he is a disciple of John the Baptist - a young man looking for something more to life. But he is not sure what that 'something' might be. John sees Jesus walking by and identifies him as the Lamb of God. Andrew (and another disciple who is not named) senses that in this man he will find what he is looking for. Jesus takes the initiative and welcomes them into his company. He invites the pair to 'Come and see'. Then he asks them one of the most fundamental questions of life: 'What are you looking for?' (John 1:35-42). What is the aim or purpose to your life; what are you looking for inside yourself, what are you looking for in me, Jesus?

Through this prolonged encounter Andrew realises that he has found something essential to his identity, integrity and to where he belongs. His sense of himself is transformed and his first response is to bring his brother to share the experience. 'He first found his brother Simon and . . . brought [him] to Jesus' (John 1:41-42). It is noticeable that the transformation of Andrew is both personal and communal. We hear very little of Andrew for the remainder of the Gospels, but when we do, he is invariably bringing people to Jesus. That extraordinary 'coming to himself' which happens to him through his encounter with Jesus propels him again and again to share it with others.

Knowing the person of Jesus and his message of the Kingdom of God has a transforming effect on generations of people, just as it does on Andrew and the first disciples. The word 'Kingdom' does not refer to a place, but to the power of God which is rooted in love. Wherever the love of God prevails in our world, the Kingdom is there. It suggests a matrix of interdependent loving relationships with self, others, God, and the created world – very different to the loneliness and confusion previously described.

There are Kingdom people everywhere - people who build relationships and base their lives on love and justice, on peace and freedom. Not all are Christians, and not all Christians are Kingdom people, but contentment and life fulfilment characterises them all. Jesus came to call every person to belong to such a Kingdom. But the call now and throughout history sometimes goes unheard in the midst of our busy lives and everyday concerns. The Corinthians of old, for example, must have been like us in many ways. Paul seems to spend his time reminding them that all worldly things are fleeting; everything will pass away. Concern about worldly interests must be kept in proportion; to be full of worry, to have

anxious and perplexing care, is a distraction that keeps us from what is really important (1 Cor. 7:29-31). It is just as difficult today to separate the distractions from the essentials - what brings us closer to the kingdom from what leads us around in circles of loneliness and isolation. That is one reason why religious education as an ongoing, life long process, is so important.

Pope Francis writes that:

[I]t is not the same thing to have known Jesus as not to have known him, not the same thing to walk with him as to walk blindly, not the same thing to hear his word as not to know it, and not the same thing to contemplate him, to worship him, to find our peace in him, as not to do so. It is not the same thing to try to build the world with his Gospel as to try to do so by our own lights. We know well that with Jesus life becomes richer and that with him it is easier to find meaning in everything. (Pope Francis, 2013, notes 130 and 266)

We too can encounter Jesus spiritually as friend, brother, and guide. That is precisely the invitation of the Christian faith. Taken seriously, the Christian invitation asks us to live in good quality interpersonal relationships depend on self-awareness, integrity, compassion and empathy - the ability to walk in the shoes of the other. Furthermore, it lifts up values to live by such as equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy and respect for human dignity and identity. This is a theme I will return to when I explore the values behind the new Junior Cycle.

Christian Religious Education

It is important to say from the outset that Christian education is committed to academic excellence. This is achieved through respecting the different disciplines while challenging students to achieve their potential across the curriculum. The aim of all Christian education is to facilitate the intellectual and emotional development of mature human persons who will have the capacity to draw upon multiple resources in interpreting their lives. During the day, students follow their timetables; while the subjects vary the individual student remains a unique person with a past and a future. A successful education is one which provides students with the ability to draw from the rich treasures of both faith and reason in order to contribute towards a future that holds promise for all (Catholic Schools Partnership (CSP), 2014, 24).

Christian religious education then is a subset of Christian education. It has particular significance because, like all religious education, it deals with ultimate questions. How we answer those questions cannot but influence our values, view of life, and the choices we make. Our identity is inseparable from our faith – whether religious or not. It is not something we park at the school gate and take up again as we leave the schoolyard: ‘Rather, it is a reality that frames and interprets all of life. To equate all religions is, in a real sense, to empty them of any significance. No believer will ever do this’ (CSP, 2014, 25).

Of course it is both possible and legitimate to study religions and religious beliefs as a social science. But for the many parents who are committed to the education and formation of their children in accord with their religious beliefs, an approach which focuses on learning about a faith tradition rather than learning from it and participating in it, is insufficient. This has given rise to renewed calls for Catholic schools to support Catholic parents who wish to have their teenage children socialised in faith.³ It has also given rise to the articulated conviction that Catholic schools should provide opportunities for catechesis, for formation in faith in the living God revealed in the person of Christ.

At its core, Christian religious education, formally and informally, helps students into a warm and loving relationship with God. Knowing the ‘why’ guides the ‘how’ and the ‘what’. The ultimate aim is to help bring about the Kingdom of God, that God’s will of fullness of life for all may be ‘done on earth as it is in heaven.’ God’s Kingdom was Jesus’ sense of purpose; this is the meta-criterion that guides what and how we teach.

In other words, Christian religious education informs, forms, and transforms people’s lives, enabling them, by God’s grace, to become disciples to Jesus as ‘the way, the truth, and the life’ (John 14:6) and ‘for the life of the world’ (John 6:51). At its best, Christian religious education reaches people at the level of heart and hands as well as head. In other words, rather than an exclusively academic exercise, it is a deeply holistic and relational knowing that helps people to know and manage themselves, and relate positively and constructively to the world around them.

³ See, for example, Irish Episcopal Conference (2010).

While remaining true to the faith of the (Catholic Christian) community, Christian education also turns us out toward an intercultural, inter-religious society. This is increasingly important in a society that takes pluralism seriously. There is an expanding discourse of inclusion and respect for otherness while recognising the distinctive challenges and identity of our faith tradition. Jesus himself reminded us: ‘in my Father’s house there are many dwelling places’ (John 14:3). The challenge for religious educators is to ground people in the particular while opening them to the universal. For Christians, every articulation of the story and vision must turn us toward the neighbour in love, including the neighbour who is ‘other’ rather than ‘the same’.

Religious Education and the New Junior Cycle

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), on behalf of the Department of Education and Skills (DES), has taken an integrated approach towards the new Junior Cycle. Traditionally, learning was centred on a series of independent subjects with their own aims and course objectives. The new Junior Cycle programme is based on Principles, Statements of Learning, and Key Skills which provide an integrated learning platform.

The framework documents are clear about the vision and values underpinning these Principles, Statements of Learning, and Key Skills. The vision is one which ‘places students at the centre of the educational experience, enabling them to actively participate in their communities and in society and to be resourceful and confident learners in all aspects and stages of their lives’ (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), 2011, 9). In other words, while the student is at the centre, learning outcomes go beyond the individual to include the context – communal and global – in which they live.

The new Junior Cycle expects that through education the person will be ready, willing, and able to make a contribution in the world at large. The values ‘fundamental to the vision’ are ‘equality and inclusion, justice and fairness, freedom and democracy and respect for human dignity and identity.’ There is a clear resonance between these values and those which characterise the Kingdom of God as preached by Jesus. For example, the current *Junior Certificate Religious Education Syllabus* states that: ‘Such characteristics might include the treatment of sinners and other outsiders, the treatment of women, the special place of the poor, love of neighbour and love of enemy’ (NCCA, 2000, 19).

However, the role of religious education in second level education is by no means guaranteed with the reform of the Junior Cycle. While, previously, many schools offered approximately twelve subjects for certification at Junior Cycle, now schools will provide fewer subjects (sometimes referred to as ‘long courses’) so that students will then be able to sample a number of ‘short courses.’ English, Irish, and Mathematics will receive 240 hours minimum of engagement over the three years, other subjects approximately 200 hours, and short courses about 100 hours of student engagement over the 3 year cycle.

The *Framework for Junior Cycle 2015* identifies 24 statements of learning and eight key skills at the centre of the new Junior Cycle. The eight key skills include being literate, being numerate, managing myself, staying well, communicating, being creative, managing information and thinking, and working with others. The elements of the skills include knowing myself, making personal decisions, listening and expressing myself, being social and safe and being spiritual (Department of Education and Skills (DES), 2015, 13). Depending on how a school designs its curriculum to meet statements of learning and key skills, time devoted to subjects such as religious education may be substantially decreased.

We have already seen how Christian religious education is a deeply holistic and relational knowing that helps people to know and manage themselves, and relate positively and constructively to the world around them. With its emphasis on identity and integration, Christian religious education has much to offer not only to the teaching and learning of the Principles, Statements of Learning, and Key Skills of the new Junior Cycle but to the loneliness and spiritual hunger described earlier.

Identity and Integration: Becoming our ‘Own Selves’.

In keeping, therefore, with the vision of the new Junior Cycle, religious education helps to promote identity and integration of the person and for the person, but also for the community and the wider world.

A lesser known work by Agatha Christie, which her niece describes as one of her best, is inspired by the following lines from William Blake’s ‘Auguries of Innocence’:

Every night and every morn
Some to misery are born.

Every morn and every night
Some are born to sweet delight.
Some are born to sweet delight
And some are born to endless night. (Blake, 2016)

In the book, entitled *Endless Night*, the protagonist is haunted by the notion that he cannot be seen. He has lost so much of his own identity and with no sense of self he is convinced he is invisible, especially to those he once knew. He is incapable of having relationships, incapable of seeing past his own wants and desires. And, most frightening of all, he cannot see himself. This is as far from the Kingdom as we can imagine. This is the realm of endless night, resonant of the ghost of the fragmented self, roaming the moors in search of integration.

Compare this with the depth of personal identity and integration that resonates through *Evangelii Gaudium*. ‘I am my mission’, says Pope Francis, continuing:

My mission of being in the heart of the people is not just a part of my life or a badge I can take off; it is not an ‘extra’ or just another moment in life. Instead, it is something I cannot uproot from my being without destroying my very self. I am a mission on this earth; that is the reason why I am here in this world. We have to regard ourselves as sealed, even branded, by this mission of bringing light, blessing, enlivening, raising up, healing and freeing. (Pope Francis, 2013, notes 133-134 and 273)

Here is a contemporary echo of the joy in Andrew brought about by his relationship with God. It is mirrored in the lives of many today. Take, for instance, Katie Taylor’s reaction to winning her Olympic Gold medal for boxing in 2012. It was full of a similar joy – her relationship with God was so much part of her victory. Indeed Katie’s faith is a prominent feature on her official website which states that: ‘Katie Taylor has always spoken openly about the role of God in her life. Her strong, Christian faith plays a central role in every aspect of her life including her boxing . . . Katie’s strong faith was handed down to her by her mother, Bridget and Katie and her family regularly attend Church in Dublin’ (katietailor.ie, 2014). It describes how she prays before entering the ring and, afterwards, gives thanks to God for the talent she has been given and for looking over both her and her opponent.

Katie's faith is so central to her identity that the media has trouble representing it. In an article soon after her Olympic victory, John Waters described how: 'Katie Taylor's faith makes media throw in the towel; the boxer's faith makes interviewers squirm but it is intrinsic to her world view, her personality and her right hook' (Waters, 2012). The response of those around us, both immediate family and friends and wider society, can add to or take from that joy. That is why the dynamic between communal and personal identity is so important. Discomfort emerges from lack of knowledge and understanding of what is other. Conversely, when we know and are at home in ourselves, it is much more likely that we can engage with what is 'other.'

Conclusion

The human search for completeness is as prevalent as ever and resonates through popular culture. Evidence across a range of disciplines identifies the fragmented self and an acute spiritual hunger as phenomena in contemporary society. The fallout is precarious, especially for young people. Christian religious education has much to offer in this context. In keeping with the vision of the new Junior Cycle it places the person at the centre, emphasising the importance of personal integration, good relationships, and participating positively with community and society. In fact, because the Christian tradition shares much of the vision and values of the new Junior Cycle, it is well placed to contribute to many of the Principles, Statements of Learning, and Key Skills outlined in the framework document. Parents who wish to have their teenage children educated in their faith tradition can rest assured that it sits easily within the new Junior Cycle framework.

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