# All the way to Z

an essay in the form of a memoir and vice-versa

Chester Eagle

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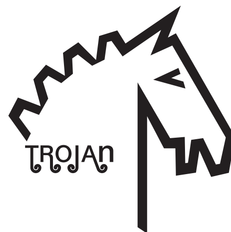
**Chester Eagle**



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This book is dedicated to the students I encountered over thirty years, to the teachers I worked with, and above all to my friend and colleague Kevin Moore who made possible the best things we did by holding everything together.

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# Introduction

In 1986 I published *Play Together, Dark Blue Twenty*, an evocation of Melbourne Grammar School in the years when I was a boy in blue: 1946-1951. Soon after, a colleague at Preston TAFE told me that he'd enjoyed the book, but what he was *really* waiting for was my recollections of my years at Preston. I told him he'd better not be in a hurry, because it had taken me more than thirty years to get sufficient distance between myself and my old school to be able to write about it. He chuckled and went away, thinking who knows what. His name was Mark Wilson and I've hardly seen him in the two decades since he put that request to me, and yet his interest, his request, has stayed with me. Mark, you are remembered!

I'm fairly sure that the book I'm now offering is not the one that Mark had in mind, and the truth is I've never had the faintest idea what sort of book would present itself when/if I ever got to writing about my years in education. In fact, as readers will see on the first page, the book had decided for itself that its subject was learning, and every time I tried to impose a little authorial insistence about it being about my 'career', such as it was, or the systems inside which the activities of learning take place, the book reimposed its own subjects: learning, students, teaching.

A word about names. I've used real names freely where I expect no offence to be taken, I've changed names when it seemed tactful to do so, and in a few cases I've simply forgotten the real names so I've invented new ones. There is, I think, a certain generality about the things I'm discussing: I've tried to use the specific in order to show the commonality of much that happened in the years and places I'm describing.

I've said in recent years that writers are at the mercy of their books, which are much more certain of what they want to be than are the writers who help them into the world. Hal Porter once called a collection of his stories *A Bachelor's Children*, and bachelors, husbands,

wives, and mothers will all tell you that many children come into the world knowing who and what they are better than those whose job it is to look after them. It is in that spirit that I give *All the Way to Z* to the world.

CAE

# A hasty sketch

The earliest learning experience that I can remember happened when I was between four and five. A woman called Jessie was helping Mother. I was bothering her with questions so she told me that if I could put a rope collar, which she gave me, on the pet lamb which our family was nurturing, then she'd give me threepence. She went inside, imagining that I wouldn't bother her for an hour or so. The lamb wasn't frightened of me as it was of big people. I hustled it into a corner between the kitchen chimney and the house, and I slipped the rope over its neck. Then I called out to Jessie. She came out, amazed, and took me in to get my threepence.

How much had I learned?

Finley school had a small paddock for horses because some of the students rode to school each day. They must have unsaddled their horses but where the saddles were stored I don't remember. The horses stayed outside while we went to class, and most of the time I gave no thought to them. We had horses on our farm and I didn't think much about them either, though I knew how skilfully Father worked them. I was learning to ride a horse but I made a mistake, or perhaps Father did; I used to get on at a certain spot beside an irrigation channel, ride to the far end of the paddock, then ride back, after which I set off on my outward journey again before returning for the second time. The horse soon picked up this routine. He always came back, the second time, much more quickly than the first. I made another mistake. I encouraged my horse to jump over a tiny ditch in the paddock and as he landed my foot came out of the stirrup. I tried to slow him down but without my foot in the fixture, I couldn't exert any purchase on the horse's mouth via the reins. He went faster and faster, despite my efforts, then, when he reached the channel at the edge of the paddock, he swerved suddenly, causing me to slew across his back. I dangled for a moment, then slid off, onto the mound of fresh earth that formed the

channel bank. Father appeared, running after the horse. He grabbed it by the dangling rein and tied it up. Then he came to me. I told him I was all right and I told him what had caused the accident. He said you must never let an animal get the upper hand, and he mounted the horse and rode it about the paddock for a few minutes, then he came back. 'If you come a buster off a horse,' he said, 'you've got to get back on, straight away. It's the same with pilots in the air force. If they have a crash, they have to fly again as soon as they can. Otherwise they lose their nerve.'

So I rode the horse for the second time that day, and all was well. These riding lessons had been happening in my school holidays, and a day or so later I returned to Melbourne, and a very different sort of learning – Latin, Mathematics, Shakespeare and Milton, et cetera! The following school holiday I made no mention of the horse, Father was busy, Mother gave it no thought, and it was years before I rode a horse again.

**B**oys with horses had the advantage that when they rode into the wind, it was the horse that did the work. Boys who rode bikes, and I was one of them, had to put their heads down and pedal. The start of the homeward journey was easy enough, because buildings sheltered me from the wind. Then there was a diagonal stretch of a few hundred metres when the wind, even if strong, wasn't in the face of the rider. When the road straightened, the struggle began. Riding into the wind was hard work, and I took every chance to give myself a rest, but these stops weren't very soothing because the cold wind reminded me of how far I had to go. Occasionally – very occasionally – one of the boys who rode to school would draw alongside and invite me to hold the strap that held his stirrup iron, so that the horse was pulling me along.

This was luxury, even if the wind still had its bite. If the rider turned to go over one of the bridges across the canal, meaning that he left the Deniliquin Road, at least he'd pulled me some of the way, and

I could muster energy for the rest of the ride. But more often when a rider came up to me, my inquiring glance would be ignored and the horse would go past, the rider giving, perhaps, a casual wave. I was aware, by this stage of my life, that in the army there were footsloggers, who got the worst of everything, and cavalry, who looked down on those on the ground. And yes, the footsloggers could slash at the cavalry with swords, bayonets, knives, but only if they put themselves in danger of being trampled. Being mounted was better.

**S**ometimes Father would take the car into the paddock when he was ploughing or harvesting. It happened only occasionally and I never knew why he did it. One morning when I was about eleven, I went into the paddock to be with him, and he stopped the tractor and plough at a point a couple of hundred metres (yards in those days) from where he'd left the car. Something he needed was on the back seat, he said, and he told me to bring the car to where he was. This surprised me. I'd never driven the car, though I'd often sat behind the wheel imagining that I could. I looked at him but he was doing something else, and he'd told me to get the car. I walked to it and got in, feeling small. There were no cushions for little people to sit on, but the key was in the ignition, and I'd seen a car started often enough.

I started the engine. It purred. It was a sunny morning, and Father wasn't far away, so I couldn't see that I could come to any harm. I knew that I had to depress the clutch, shift the gear stick, and let the clutch out, pushing the accelerator down at the same time. At my first try, I did these things quite well. I kept the car in first gear and drove it to where Father had the tractor, turned it off and got out. Father said nothing about the journey I'd just made – or just begun, perhaps – and accepted what I'd brought him. He used it to do something, and I watched. It dawned on me that he was teaching me to drive, or rather, he was letting me teach myself, and that unless something went wrong, nothing would be said. This was Father's way of teaching. There were certain things that everyone needed to be able to do, and

most people picked them up as they needed them, and the less said the better because if people felt they were under observation, they became nervous. Scared. Confidence was essential, and people became confident if they learned the right things at the right time, without anybody pestering them, harassing, getting them flustered or things like that. When my own children started to grow, I noticed that I was exactly the same as my father in the expectations I had of them.

**W**hen Mother felt I should go away to school in Melbourne, she asked Mr Eggleston, the head teacher at Finley, to write me a reference. I knocked on his door (he and his wife lived in the school grounds) and collected the envelope he gave me, then I went to a friend's house where Mother would pick me up when she came into town. I asked if I could read what he'd written and Mother said I could. I opened the envelope, filled with curiosity, to read about a boy I didn't recognise. This boy – me? – had qualities I didn't know about. I felt sure that the people who ran Melbourne Grammar would be surprised to find themselves receiving someone so gifted. Me? I looked at Mr Eggleston's writing. Did he really believe all this? Or was he flattering – a word I didn't know at that time – to please Mother?

I couldn't be sure. I knew, even at that stage, that soldiers, and I really meant mediaeval soldiers, went into battle under banners of lions, let us say, to show how brave they were, when really they were fearful and ready to run. I wasn't at all sure that it was going to be good to go to this new school with such recommendations encumbering me. What if I couldn't live up to what had been said? I put Mr Eggleston's reference back in the envelope, and handed it to Mother. What would become of it, I never asked. I think I wanted to separate myself from praise.

**A**s the time drew near, we went to Melbourne. Mother had a list the matron of the boarding house had sent her, and as she made purchases she ticked the list. Some items, like pajamas or singlets, could be

bought anywhere, but if the garment carried the school's badge, as, for instance, a blazer or cap, Mother said that we would have to go to a shop that knew. For Mother, and thus for me, this meant Myers in Bourke Street or Ball & Welch in Flinders. I felt very proud as we purchased the navy socks, with two white bands, that I would soon be wearing; I was being admitted to a club.

But clubs have rules, and make differentiations that outsiders don't know about. A lady at Ball & Welch produced a Grammar cap for me, but Mother noticed that there were two other versions of what appeared to be the same cap: what were they? The lady laid the three caps on the counter. 'When they start,' she said, 'they all wear *this* one.' This was the one she'd given me, with the school's badge woven into blue material with white cotton. 'When they pass Intermediate Certificate, they wear *this*!' The white cotton strands were replaced by metallic silver. 'And when they've passed Leaving Certificate, and they're studying Matriculation …' pride entered her voice '… *this* is what they wear!' The most senior boys, it seemed, had caps which replaced the silver thread with golden thread; they were the top of the school!

The day came, and I entered. I don't think I ever went through that imposing doorway again, in either direction, for the rest of my years. It was not for boys, unless they were being inducted, as I was, or perhaps for parents calling to take home a child who'd been expelled. (Not me, please God!)

Our car drove around a circular garden at the front of what had been the mansion of a wealthy family – benefactors of the school – and came circumspectly to rest. My case was pulled out and we, a family, passed through the door. My parents were greeted very gravely, welcomed, had their hands shaken, a few questions were asked and answered, and then the clothing mistress said she would show me where to unpack my things. She told my parents that I would have a locker all my own, but neither Mother nor Father ever saw it, such as it

was. The mistress led me through another door, two handsome panels with frosted glass inset, which swung behind me, and I sensed that, although Mother would be staying for the whole of my first term with her sister, only a couple of blocks away, and that I'd be able to have weekends with her once a month, and that when the term was ended I'd go back to New South Wales to see the farm again, I was leaving behind the life I'd led until now. I didn't really know what a tradition was, but it was all around me, now, like the 'Ora et Labora' on my cap. Pray and work. Father never prayed and Mother didn't do much of it either, though she maintained a certain façade. I'd slipped out of one tradition for another … no, one tradition had jettisoned me into an older, longer one, for my benefit, it was alleged. Was I going to be better for all this? I had to wait and see.

**A**s I write this book, I am almost seventy-five; at the time I entered boarding school, I was twelve. Was I made better by going away? At the time, I thought I was. When I'd been two years at the junior boarding school, and was about to transfer to the senior school, a building of grimly assertive bluestone overlooking Saint Kilda Road, I had a holiday back in New South Wales. I went to the post office, as my parents had asked me to do, then I decided to have a look at the school where I'd been a pupil. I decided not to enter the grounds – that would be a way of letting it reclaim me – but to walk around them. I was walking along a road dividing the school from the showgrounds and sporting field, when I saw someone digging. I walked closer and recognized Norman McNair, a year younger than me, the brother of a boy who'd been in my class before I went away. We greeted each other politely, because Norman had always been a quiet boy and I was unsure of my status in his eyes, now that I'd left Finley school behind. Norman told me what his brother was doing, and what class he, Norman, was now in. He didn't ask me about school in Melbourne; in fact, there was something about his courtesy that told me that our separation was complete. He was digging a hole to plant a tree. He

had a few trees in a box behind him, and he said that his father had responded to the school's desire to have some boundary markers on its western side, some shade for children wanting to get out of the sun, by saying that Norman would plant the trees if the school bought them.

The school had bought them and Norman was digging holes with his shovel. His father's shovel, more likely. I feel I should remember what sort of tree he was planting, but I don't. Did the trees grow, and give shade? Let us hope so, but I cannot say. I belonged in Melbourne, now. I might have told Norman that most of the boarders at Melbourne Grammar came from distant places, as I did, but that would not have impressed the imperturbable boy. I'd thrown in my lot with another group of people, they were said to be influential, so I didn't belong at my old school any more. Norman was inside the fence, digging, and I was on the other side, trying to maintain the connection but really just looking on. I walked around the rest of the school's perimeter, then to wherever it was that I was to meet Mother, or find the car. Cars were never locked in those days. I told Mother that I'd met Norman McNair, she asked, 'And how was Norman?' and I, no doubt, said, 'He was all right, we had a talk,' and Mother, always respectful, would have asked no more.

I knew, when I was in Melbourne, that the boys, and more particularly the teachers, were different people from those I'd encountered elsewhere. The school had class, a proud sense of itself, that nobody in our country town possessed. Both Mother and Father had pride a-plenty, but it was of a different sort. My Melbourne school had, among its numerous clubs and societies, one that learned about, and practised the procedures of Victoria's parliament. I never joined this club, but it took itself seriously and posted its recent doings and coming events on a glass-fronted board. A number of my fellows, consciously and self-selecting, were readying themselves for the future they expected. This never struck me as anything more than averagely strange, until something that happened in year eleven – when I was

wearing one of those silver-braided caps, if you remember – brought home to me that some parts of Australia's lower class traditions had clung to me in the years that I'd spent in the bluestone.

We were finishing an English class under Mr Vercoe, known as Mal, because there was a ventriloquist on stage and radio with the same name and *his* nickname was Mal. Mr Vercoe, *our* Mal, finished whatever he'd set out to do a few minutes before the bell. He turned in his chair and said, 'Write something. Anything you like. One paragraph, and be quick about it.'

Impromptu tasks like this were not the way our school did business, and a number of boys grumbled, but I dashed down a few lines about the man who had the farm next to ours: Norman Taylor. I said that facially he resembled Jack Dyer, the Richmond captain, because he did, and that he might have been just as good a footballer, because Norman and one of his brothers had been champions in the Finley team for years; he'd been invited to Melbourne by seven of the twelve league clubs, but had preferred to stay on his farm. Football was something he enjoyed on Saturday afternoons, and it meant no more than that.

I read my piece about the neighbour I admired, Mal Vercoe said, 'What about that?' and a couple of boys spoke against what I'd written. Looking back, and struggling to remember their objections, I think they felt that I'd brought into their world something which I should have had the social sense to exclude. They had their say, the bell rang, then Mal Vercoe said, as he stood, dismissing his class, 'It was good.' Nobody mentioned the matter again, but I felt a little more accepting of the identity, and the rigour, of my bluestone school.

**M**uch of the learning at Melbourne Grammar was imparted by implication. Daily life was ritualised to a high degree; by taking part, by following everyone else, you gave at least provisional acceptance, and when you'd been doing that for a number of years, you realised, or perhaps you didn't, that you'd internalised the reasoning behind the rituals. For boarders, life was regulated by roll calls and prayers.

Roll calls ensured that you were bodily present, and prayers caused the rest of you, up to and including your spirit, to fall into line. Masters who supervised prep. (preparation, evening study) had their standard prayers; if ever I hear 'Almighty God, forasmuch as without Thee we are unable to please Thee, mercifully grant that Thy Holy Spirit may in all things direct and rule our hearts' then I see Geoff Fell, the master who taught Modern History in matriculation, limping across the quadrangle, the twisting of his body making him more and more unlike the naval commander who'd taken a job at the school. I was a boarder, and, being away from my family for many weeks at a time, the masters who brought their subjects to us were also role models.

There was a night when my dormitory was full of boys in pajamas, talking, waiting for the master on duty to come through and say goodnight. Lights out! Geoff Fell was on duty, he came through, chatting warmly to anybody who had anything to say, or ask, and after he'd passed into the next dormitory in the row of four, a friend of mine suddenly burst out, 'You look at our masters! They've all got something wrong with them! None of them are real men!'

Real men? Geoff had held the rank of Commander, but he'd slipped away from the world's activities to be a boarding house master. What was wrong with that? Somebody had to look after us, or we'd be helpless …

We'd be lost. There'd be nobody to oversee the calling of the roll, nobody to make sure that everything happened as and when it was supposed to. Real men? Were we, a dozen year 9 and 10 boys, going to become real men? It seemed to happen to everybody, or so we thought, because we were an Anglican school, and though there were other Anglican schools for girls, and they were important because that's where our future wives would be studying, we also knew that boys mattered more than girls. It was boys like us who grew up to take the leading positions in society – the judges, doctors, barristers, businessmen, political leaders … we were a proud outpost of empire, and needed to be worthy, to be able to represent the values that the

empire stood for and which our country, ever so distant, but also proud, accepted.

So there was more to be learned than the stuff of the classroom. The way we studied, the way we behaved, was more important than the material we had to learn. The Melbourne Grammar that I attended appeared, to its boys, to have no curricular debate. The university – there was only one – stated what it expected students entering its courses to know, they controlled the upper levels of schooling through an Exams Board, and the lower levels followed suit. Latin, French, Mathematics, started early enough in the lower levels to allow boys to be ready for the matriculation exams at the end of the process. Commercial subjects were taught to those who couldn't approach the requirements of real learning. Trade, or practical subjects were relegated to those government schools which dealt with such things. Our ideas of what it was suitable for boys to learn were borrowed from the schools of England which catered to the upper or aspiring classes in that country. The organization of our school was both monastic and militarily autocratic, a poisonous mix in present-day terms, but powerful, let me assure you, and successful. Formulas are hard to beat because they normally have heaps of social force behind them, pressing their claims.

Perhaps the school's greatest lesson, and the one most successfully delivered, was in the use of authority. The headmaster ruled, or did he? He had a council above him, and they had to be pleased, or he'd find himself replaced. Under the head were the senior masters, then the younger ones. Under the masters was a layer of prefects, and beneath them a trainee rank of sub-prefects, called probationers. Sporting teams had captains, vice-captains, and in each team there was a 'third man' to spread the range of authority and rank one stage further. This was, apparently, preparation for the way a democratic society was made to work. If good, capable men filled the important positions, things should go along fairly well, eh?

It was the school's job to make us think so.

I went through university and became a teacher. In putting those words before you I'm slipping past many things that will later be explored, in order to get to Bairnsdale. I'd been given the appointment and I had to find out where this town was. I took a train and arrived on a day when the whole school was having … I was going to say a picnic, but the word doesn't fit. Picnics come out of a tradition hard to sustain in Australia. The school, or those of its students who hadn't already broken their ties with it, had gone somewhere beside the lakes for the day. I sat in the staffroom with someone who greeted me with, 'You're replacing Ken Wong. He's going back to Melbourne. We were wondering who we'd get.' Government schools were staffed by civil servants in the city. Teachers could seek promotions and transfers, but the vacancies they created were dealt with by people unknown to the school, and vice versa. This was not how famous schools did their staffing!

Over the next half hour teachers came in. After a day outdoors, they were only mildly interested in me. They'd deal with me next year when I was one of them. Ron Norris said he'd pick me up at my hotel after dinner and have me home for the evening. Ken Wong said he'd show me around in the morning.

Ken drove me out of Bairnsdale and toward a bluff cut by a river swerving to enter the lakes. 'That's where we're going,' he said. The river swung away from us, we passed through trees, and then we came to the top of the bluff – and the view it gave.

It was huge. Ken, pointing, named towns far out of sight. Bruthen, Buchan, Omeo. Dargo, beyond some ranges possessing the remote dignity of Tsars. Swifts Creek, Tambo Crossing. Lakes Entrance to the right, again out of sight. Metung, Nicholson, and Orbost, at the furthest extremity of the railway. 'It's a big place,' he said. 'It's going to take you a while to get to know it.' He hadn't tried. He was leaving a gap, and civil servants had appointed me to fill it. I wasn't frightened because I didn't have enough imagination to know what the future would be like.

I caught the train back to Melbourne that afternoon. I packed all my things. I left my recordings of Mozart, Beethoven and Delius with someone I wanted to be my girlfriend. I visited various friends by way of signalling that my university years had ended. I went to New South Wales to be with my parents one more time. I had my first adult appointment. All I had to do was do it successfully. I assumed I would be able to do that. Mother had been a teacher, years before. The Eagle family, as I was aware, knew how to do things. They had pride, and even if they would be described, today, as rural battlers, they were successful enough to be generous.

I thought I should be all right. As January drew to its close, I returned to Melbourne, and a few days later Mother and Father drove me to Gippsland, through country I didn't know. It was green in January! I could see that Gippsland, even at its western end, was different from the Riverina that I'd known. Different, too, from Melbourne, because the towns were small. There wasn't much there. No orchestras, no great libraries …

What would I be pointing to, when I gave direction to my students' lives?

I remember my first failure, and the subsequent failing that I didn't know I'd failed, when I most certainly had. I told my 2CD students to write something 'of their own choice', as I was prissy enough to put it. 'Who'd like to read?' A boy called Robert Rowe volunteered. I should have been ready.

Robert read out what seemed like a transcription of a race call. He must have heard hundreds of them to get it so right. I assume that his father and/or his father's friends were betting men, and I suppose they spent Saturdays in pubs, listening to broadcasts of the races. My own father was not a betting man, but he liked to listen to the races occasionally, so I too had heard plenty of race broadcasts. If you walked the streets of Finley on a Saturday afternoon you couldn't miss the sound of rising excitement inside the pubs, their open doors

letting out the sound of the radio and the raucous barracking of men in the bar with a few bob on 'one of the nags', as they put it. I didn't look down on this so much as I couldn't see that it signified anything. It was vulgar, it didn't rise to poetry, it was a bit of cheap excitement, soon over, with nobody but the bookies any better off.

Robert's friends thought his reading was marvellous, and they looked at me to see if I'd enjoyed it. I hadn't. The boy had succeeded, but not in a way that meant anything to me. 'Can we have it again sir?' one boy said. Again! I didn't want that, but thought I'd better concede. Robert called his race again, with everyone knowing the winner's name this time, and sure enough the same horse won. 'You really know about calling horse races,' said I, and Robert, stepping over my sarcasm, said something like, 'I've heard a few,' causing his friends to laugh. Their laugh excluded me.

No doubt I'd already made mistakes but that is the first one that I can remember, and what a shocker. My first year was ghastly, and it was only over the Christmas holidays before the second year, when I started to think of things that would connect with the world of my students, that my career could be said to have begun.

There was no syllabus to follow. I was baffled by this, and didn't know what to do about it. My Melbourne Grammar masters had performed with amazing surety. They seemed forever certain. At university, you chose your subjects according to what was printed in the handbook – descriptions, themes, areas to be covered, text books, required reading, and so on. And you made inquiries of those who'd done the subject to find out whether it was to be sought after, or avoided. At my school, there was no syllabus. Nobody had laid down what was to be taught, let alone how to go about it. I imagined that the inspectors, when they came, would provide answers, but they had little to offer. Over the next few years, I developed my own answers, and they were idiosyncratic, if frequently successful. I found, for instance, that nobody would take any notice of English poetry, but bush ballads, even the roughest of

them, went down well. The boys – all boys, all boys, I didn't realise how damaging this was – liked to come in together to say the chorus, and to take individual lines for themselves, if asked to do so. The boys were embarrassed when reading plays; they couldn't act when they had a book in their hands full of words it would never have occurred to them to say. I got them improvising on simple themes, mostly of crowds versus individuals. One favourite was something I knew from my own childhood – the spruiking of men persuading audiences into boxing tents at local shows, the barracking of crowds for the men they knew, the despair of those knocked out and dragged out of the ring.

The school I was working in had been a School of Mines, Gippsland having been a mining area, and I decided that an old corrugated iron shed cascading down a slope would make a theatre for my students' plays. A woodwork teacher called Bill Baker got his apprentices to put a floor at the bottom, and I got rid of everything else from the years of mining. Nothing was going to stop me! Soon I had students performing in this place, and groups of forty or fifty looking on, with a couple of lights, a door at the top and another at the side. Looking back, I'm amazed that I was left almost unchecked.

There was one note of caution. Ern Illidge, the Acting Principal, asked me to see him one morning. He said that I was to be congratulated for getting the boys to throw themselves with such enthusiasm into their acting, but – and he paused – *but* – I filed the overtones of this word in my mind – when one of my classes had performed at the Parents' Night in Education Week, something that took place in the Prince Regent Theatre, the town's largest space, there had been comments about the boys' performance. Ern, a mining man himself, had been told by certain people, including the Regional Inspector of Primary Schools, that they'd felt worried, sitting there, because they hadn't known what might be coming next.

Looking back, I am surprised at the hardness of my heart. I was committed to what I was doing, but I was too young to know

wherein, exactly, I'd offended. I'd brought myself to the heart of one of education's problems. There are parents whose idea of education is that it should hand on their own restrictions. There are senior people in education of like mind. Praise will be given to teachers who get their students to perform as the restricted want them to perform; other teachers, those wanting to push boundaries, are discouraged. I had hoped that the inspectors would be able to tell me what I should be doing. They didn't and they couldn't. Their main call was to tell me – and everyone else – what they should not be doing. There was a safe, restricted zone in the centre, and it was surrounded by things that shouldn't happen. Ern Illidge was more tolerant than I gave him credit for. He was letting me know that the field of teaching was not without dangers, and would I please be wary?

I wouldn't. I was a gifted mimic and I made speeches to my friends, most of them in Melbourne, using Ern's sombre and pedantic way of speaking. 'Well', I would say, 'and there is a *well*' and on I would go with something ridiculous, and we'd all laugh, and I'd feel certain that I was right.

What seems sad to me today is that if I was right, I was right only as an unusually exploratory individual, operating outside any framework of guidance. The paradox here is that my colleagues teaching woodwork, metalwork, automotive studies, technical drawing, etc, had guidelines laid down for them, instructions about what was to be done at each level, and the conveniently limiting factor of examination requirements. Society closed in, also, on two other fronts: apprenticeships and parental expectations.

The inspectors of trade subjects were the spokesmen of their industry and it was their job to see that apprentice carpenters, motor mechanics, etc, were learning what they needed to know. And parents, particularly farming parents, had clear expectations of what their young people should be able to do by the time they went to work. The teachers of practical subjects, then, had a fair idea of what they had to

do, and their students were almost as aware as they were of what was wanted.

Humanities teachers were in another position. Nobody seemed to know what they should be doing. Their students should be *working*, but what on? They should come away from the school able to read and write, and they should be able to speak well, but how was this to be achieved? It's worth reminding the reader that the school to which I'd been appointed was a technical school, part of an educational stream provided by the state of Victoria as an alternative to high school education, which was co-educational and had, over-shadowing it, the requirements of the university (only one, remember). Thus the university was one of the major guardians of curriculum, and teachers were supposed to deliver, perhaps enforce, curriculum, rather than to develop it, or even to think much about it. Parents, in sending their sons and daughters to school, thought they were putting them in the hands of people who knew what had to be done, and this would be known because there was expected to be, somewhere, some all-knowing authority laying down what was required.

The idea that the school, and the individual teacher, held responsibility for the curriculum they chose to offer lay far in the future

**A**t Bairnsdale Technical School, boys assembled four times a day: in the morning at 9; after morning recess; after lunch; and after afternoon recess. Boys who came from surrounding towns would also gather at about 3.45 to be lined up for the buses that would take them home.

This had a strange effect on the school. It filled in the morning and emptied in the afternoon. Thus it was empty for more hours than it was used. Its facilities were of the barest, and comforts there were none. The building, of itself, would teach nothing, so the business of education, not unnaturally, was left to the staff and students, and it was assumed to be a one-way process, knowledge flowing out of teachers into students. To say this is to simplify, of course, because

every class had good students who drew the best from their masters, and perhaps guided the teaching by the questions they asked, and by their willingness to do things they were told to do. The achievements of even the most dominant teachers rest on the understandings of those they dominate – if they do. Someone had the bright idea that the school's entry to the building, four times a day, might be more disciplined if the boys marched to a drum.

A drum! The military connotations were never discussed. The drum was instituted and it boomed for years before it was done away with. Boom, boom, boom! Four times a day the boys entered to the beating of a drum. Why? Because, as stated, it not only enforced discipline, it showed that discipline was being enforced. People in the street would *know*! It was done because if it wasn't the boys would *straggle*: this was unthinkable. When decisions about discipline had been made, they had to be enforced. Decisions were in fact orders, of the military type, to be obeyed because …

… of fear of punishment, automatic respect for authority, all the other things that come to the militaristic mind. Boys at Bairnsdale Tech. were poorly dressed, many of them, neatly dressed if they came from 'good' families, as some did. Many of the ex-servicemen who'd settled on the land sent their sons to the tech. because they'd learn practical things , not the stuff taught at high school, on the other side of town. In, I think, my second year, Principal Rupert Terrill and Headmaster Bill Grose went to Melbourne and during their stay they watched the Head of the River boatraces, featuring the six famous Public (meaning private) schools of Melbourne and Geelong. The races took place on the Yarra River, and were attended by throngs from the best known schools of the cities. Old Boys and Old Girls attended, wearing ribbons in the colours of the school they favoured. The boatraces were well reported and were used, in their way, to establish the social dominance of the people supporting the schools involved. So Principal Terrill and Headmaster Grose had gone to the boatraces. Weeks passed, and no announcements were made. One morning I went to the classroom

where I was to teach, to find, not the usual chaos, but Rupert Terrill standing on the platform, and in front of him a boy wearing a grey blazer, and, bless my soul, a grey cap! No such thing had been seen at the tech. before. Terrill was telling my class that this was what everybody would be wearing as soon as the shops had stocks to sell. The boys were unusually quiet; the principal, who'd had a lot of illness, was happier than I'd seen him in months. He explained, before inviting the boy to take off the uniform they would all be wearing soon, that he and Mr Grose had been most impressed by what they'd seen in Melbourne and felt that it was the right move to make.

I was appalled. I knew what was coming, and it came. Blazers got grubby and they weren't dry-cleaned. Parents who hadn't wanted to buy blazers didn't replace them with bigger ones as their boys grew. Caps were worn irreverently, twisted this way and that, though I don't remember them being worn back to front, in the American baseball style (I'm writing this in 2008). I saw boys in the street, riding back after lunch, advertising their school in exactly the way the principal and headmaster had not wanted when they introduced the uniform without discussion. They had tried to create an impression of quality by a decision made at the top and imposed downwards, and what they had created – an obviously scornful rejection of the values they had thought would improve the school – was evidence that they'd failed, and, worse, that they were in charge of a school that revelled in their failure.

**I** want now to introduce something that happened in my next school. How I got there is another story, to be told later. I had moved to Preston Technical School, in the northern suburbs of Melbourne. The section of the school where I was working had year 10 and year 11 boys; the girls and the younger boys had sections of their own, across a large, un-treed park named after someone called Zwar. Photos of football and cricket teams lined the walls of the upstairs passage, and boys would point out Bill Lawry and Ron Barassi if you showed interest.

Bill had opened the batting for Australia, and been his country's captain. Ron had been the dynamic captain of Melbourne Football Club when it was at its height, and later coach of various teams. Preston boys could get somewhere if they were good enough.

In this upstairs section, there were two rooms that could be joined or separated by folding panels. Visiting speakers usually spoke in the double room so created. I remember the aboriginal pastor and ex-footballer, Doug Nichols, entertaining the boys in this space, a witty, cheeky man, full of good humour. When the panels were drawn back again, teachers couldn't help but be aware of what was going on in the other space, because voices carried easily. One of my humanities colleagues, Moira Mitchell, made us laugh in the staffroom when she told us that she'd had to teach with Fol Morgan in the room behind her. Fol was the school chaplain, and he'd opened up challengingly one morning with, 'I want to speak about something that concerns you all. Masturbation!' Moira said the boys on her side of the panels were as alarmed, and silent, as those on Fol's side. Fol's remarks on masturbation gripped the boys of Moira's class until she had to sit down and let Fol take over.

He had not intended this. Fol was a serious, well-intentioned man. (Aren't they all?) I mention him because of something I heard him say when I had gone into the senior master's office to put in a statistical report on attendances, or something of the sort. Fol was at the desk belonging to the senior master, one Keith Eltham. They were studying a sheet of paper. To my surprise, Fol said solemnly, 'This is part of the development of the spiritual life of the school …' and Keith Eltham, a man I distrusted, nodded. I put down what I'd come to deliver, and got out. The spiritual life of the school? I'd been there for months without detecting any sign of it. Yet Eltham had been smiling, and Morgan had said the words in the tone of sombre sincerity I knew to expect of him. Spiritual life? Who were they kidding, apart from themselves?

I imagine, knowing myself at that time, that I found sympathetic ears in the staff room by repeating what I'd heard, with scathing

mockery in my voice, trying to give myself comfort. What we were trying to do wasn't, surely, hopeless? The boys at Preston, different from those in Bairnsdale, took rivalry and competition for granted. They wanted marks, and results. They wanted good incomes and jobs, and they knew such things didn't come easily. They wanted to get into the senior tech., which was also on the site, and find their way from there. They wanted …

They were different from the Gippsland people, who had a generosity about them as well as their shortcomings. Gippslanders, on the edge of the competitive financial system, seemed to be allowed both roughness and a tolerant sympathy because they fed into the urban system but didn't actually carry its burden, as the boys of Preston, and their parents, did. Nature, vast and generous, might offer a spiritual refuge in Gippsland's mountains, rivers, lakes, skies and seas, but where was the equivalent in Preston?

Fol Morgan couldn't tell me that.

**I**n Gippsland, I was young and single. Boys asked me to let them show me their farms. Parents invited me to drop in for a cup of tea if I was passing. People showed me where gold mines had been, or tracks leading nowhere now. I bought a Volkswagen and began to explore, finding places long forgotten. Being young and curious, my mind filled with questions. I asked anybody I thought might be able to tell me. I became popular, or at least respected, because people saw that my interest was genuine. Searching the forests for gold had given way to searching for timber. My friend Sid Merlo accompanied me on a drive to Mount Baldhead, one of my spiritual places, and stopped me so we could overlook a maze of ranges and gullies where water fed into the Nicholson River, which began its journey at Mount Baldhead. It was afternoon and shadows were filling the valleys. Sid named a man he drank with at the Terminus, who worked for a local mill. 'If he was here now, I tell you what, he'd look out there and he'd tell you what sort of trees were growing on every single one of those ridges,

just by the colour of the leaves. Messmate there, he'd say, silvertop there. No good going down there, he'd say, only manna gum, that's no good. The mill sends him out when they're looking for where they're going to work next, and he takes a look from a place like this, then he goes in and has a close look. Then he tells'em where to start when they've finished where they are.'

This told me things about local knowledge. Everything Sid and his brothers told me about Gippsland made me aware that the humblest things had a history. Gippsland had been functioning long before I arrived with such particles of knowledge as I brought. Proud as I was of knowing how to use the English language, everyone around me knew things I didn't know. They knew the names of wildflowers, they knew when this or that had been built. People long dead came to life in their stories, and, most wonderful for me, they knew the most precious spots in the mountains and the tracks and turn-offs that would take you to them. I had never dreamed that this forbidding region, mountains on the horizon and lakes at their feet, could be so inviting if approached with respect. I was a teacher, and this was reason to be humble, because if you taught the young of a region you were teaching the region itself, and you couldn't do that unless you had an idea of what it already knew. I began to write an historical column for a weekly newspaper, and that sometimes meant digging into such files as the *Bairnsdale Advertiser* possessed, stored beneath the floorboards in a space where one had to kneel without bumping one's forehead against the single bulb that allowed one to find the papers for particular years.

Late in my Gippsland years I was drinking with a friend at a hotel in Kalimna, above Lakes Entrance. We started talking to some men who were taking a trawler to sea at midnight. When I told them who I was one of them told me that they had 'Schmitty' as a member of their crew. Schmitty was Jim McNamara, who'd attended the technical school a few years earlier, though he was near enough to ineducable. Schmitty could do almost none of the things teachers demanded, so

his presence was a threat to classroom order, though I think, looking back, that he wanted little more than to be cared for. If you tried to be hard on him you paid the price in disorder, which he was gifted in creating.

Schmitty left school as soon as he could, or sooner, but once in a while he came back, usually to give me fish. On a number of occasions I found him at the front of the school with a parcel of salmon, wrapped in newspaper. He made it clear that this was a present he'd brought up from Lakes Entrance for me. I'd take the fish, thanking him profusely and wondering which of my fellow teachers' families would want them. Then Jim would walk to the highway and hitch a ride back to Lakes. I'd go inside, relieved at seeing the back of him, but touched by his response to my failure as a teacher to do him any good.

The fishermen in the Kalimna pub told me about a night when they'd gone out at midnight, and, having got their boat across the bar, they left Jim in the cabin, under orders to wake them when they got to their fishing grounds at three or four in the morning. They'd then start to trawl. But Jim had had as much to drink as they had, and when they went below to sleep, he put his head on a bench, and slept too. When they woke, it was bright day. They looked in the cabin and there he was, asleep. How far past their fishing grounds were they? Nobody knew. They banged on the cabin but couldn't wake him, so they had to smash a pane of glass and reach in to get the cabin open. 'Schmitty, you useless bastard,' they told him. 'What's the good of you if we can't trust you to wake us …'

They must have known the mistake was theirs, because Schmitty was less reliable than they were, and they'd all been drinking, but he was, at least, a convenient butt for stories, and they laughed at the man who'd made a mess of their arrangements, then they had one more round of drinks before they left to get their boat ready to go to sea. My friend and I went home, affected, even troubled a little, by the encounter, funny as it had been. It seemed to me that as a teacher I was secure, out of danger's way, but it was Schmitty (Jim) and those

who worked with him who had to face the water and the night, it was the timber workers who faced bushfires when they got loose, while teachers did their work in the classroom, quietly, safe and sound.

In my last two years at the tech. I taught year 12 English in a narrow room with a long, narrow table; the place had been used for years by Miss Balfour's dressmaking class on Monday evenings. One of my students was John Moreland, a slim boy who wrote extremely well. Late in the previous year he'd written an essay about going into the bush with his father and other men; his father, I knew, was a timber-cutter, though I'd never met him. It seemed to me that John's essay accommodated the mystical feelings that I and many other people had for the mountain bush. It was written simply and possessed no doubts about the apprehensions it expressed. I read it to a gathering of parents I'd been asked to address on the satisfactions of being a teacher. I said to this group that one never quite knew what one would receive when one asked young people to write. There'd be mis-spellings, clumsiness, bad punctuation, etc, but what the students found inside themselves was always likely to surprise. A farmer came to me after this talk expressing his admiration for the essay: 'It must be very satisfying to know you've caused someone to write something like that.' A year or two later this man sold his farm and took up counselling as his profession, and I like to think that hearing John's essay was a step along the way in his change.

But John wrote no more essays of that sort. He sat in the dressmaking room as his group went through the books and exercises that were part of the English course, and he was strangely, awkwardly silent. Knowing what insights he had within him, I was troubled, but he wouldn't be drawn. Then, as the year went on, he put his head on the long table during my classes, apparently asleep, though I didn't think he was. If I asked him to read, he hadn't written anything. If I asked him a question, he said he didn't know. I found opportunities to ask each of his fellows if they knew what was wrong, but they told me,

one and all, that they didn't know either. His other teachers weren't aware that anything was wrong; he was all right in their classes.

Then I was having drinks one afternoon in the Club Hotel. In a small group not far away was an imposing, somewhat frightening man. There was an authority, something dictatorial, in the way he held his glass of beer. He was big, someone who'd never have to fight because nobody would want to fight him. I asked who he was. He was John Moreland's father, the timber-cutter I'd heard about in the essay that had impressed me. I didn't make an opportunity to ask him about his son's education, or the falling away thereof, because I knew. I saw that my attempts to 'teach' John Moreland were attempts to persuade him to follow the direction I was pointing out to him, and he knew, inside himself, that he had another path to follow, and there was no escaping.

It's natural for teachers to be proud of their successes. Being human, we need to see our students do well so we can find the confidence, hope and optimism to go back for the endless struggles which teachers endure. Nonetheless, it's our failures which teach us most, as I hope my descriptions will have shown.

**A**t Melbourne Grammar, the light of a fierce scrutiny played on us all the time. Honours and success were offered, but failure yawned behind. Bairnsdale Tech. was different. How could those who were failing be driven on, or altered in their being so they sought what was offered in the light?

They couldn't. They could fail if that was what was how things were. Government schools had to take everybody. They couldn't expel the unsuccessful, claiming the fault wasn't theirs. When we accepted our intake, we were stuck with them, as they were with us.

There is a popular expression: Give them the flick! Bairnsdale Tech., being a government school, found it hard to do this.

And yet it was done.

The school had fallen on hard times under Rupert Terrill. In his last months he came to the school only occasionally, wearing dark glasses and feeling his way along the corridor to his office. What he did there I had no idea. We were leaderless and the place had been organised around a leader. He died, and the chairman of the school council told us that he had been a good man. I was charitable enough to think that perhaps he had been, but realistic enough to know that the school was living on its habits, developed between the wars when depression had brought everybody low. The first signs of post-war affluence were noticeable around the town, but not at the tech., unless you thought those caps and blazers meant something …

Word reached us that a new man had been appointed, and told to get the place in order. He arrived. He was a big man, a catholic, with the notions of discipline and authority taught by his church. He spoke courteously, intending to be obeyed. Teachers welcomed him because they felt strengthened by the fact that there was a force to be reckoned with in the office.

Then he took a step which made us face what we were dealing with. He discovered, or perhaps someone reported to him, that somebody had written 'Get fucked' on the back row of desks in one of our rooms. Inquiries were made as to when it had been written. Boys who'd used the room were questioned as to when the offending words had been there and when they hadn't. A time was firmed up, then a class was identified. The teacher of the class was questioned. Who'd been sitting in that particular seat?

Neville Smith.

This was a boy, simple of face and coarse of tongue, from one of the timber mills on the fringe of Bruthen, a small town twenty minutes from Bairnsdale. People who worked for timber mills had no status, though they ranked each other closely after studying each other's skills. Saw milling was dangerous because of the terrible cost of mistakes to those who made them, it was repetitive and it required concentration for hours on end. Only a handful could do it well and

they were selected – dumped into it, perhaps – from a class who were generally seen as drifters – nomadic, unstable people who liked to move around, interstate and intrastate, in old cars, with uncertifiable relationships (the men) and plenty of kids (the women). They had no political clout and nobody to stand up for them.

Neville Smith was one of these.

The principal called an assembly. He announced that an obscenity had been written on a desk, and the malefactor had confessed. He would leave the school, never to return. He would surrender his key to the master in charge of lockers, and catch the bus one last time. It then occurred to the principal, or to his sense of drama, that Smith might be getting away with library books. 'Mr Eagle,' said the principal, 'will you check the cards to see if Smith has anything out?' I disappeared around the corner of the building. Neville Smith borrowing from the library? Good heavens! I watched the highway traffic for a couple of minutes, feeling humiliated, then came around the corner, shaking my head. Smith had no books. The principal pronounced solemn excommunication, and Smith was no longer one of us.

I must assume he caught the bus home, and I am inclined to think that he was probably happy, in the long run, to have got out of the place as easily as he did. The long term effects of being treated in this way can only be guessed at. What the school had witnessed that afternoon might have been an early step in a life of crime, and it might have been a blessed escape from a punitive system which, having punished, was letting go. It did not escape me that Smith's position in the expulsion was morally simpler than my own, or of everybody else that afternoon. The new principal spoke as if acting on behalf of all of us, when most of us, I think, wanted to keep well away. He was not only making us complicit, he was showing us the way the school would run for the next few years and challenging us, really, as to whether we'd stay and help, or find an opportunity to leave.

By then I loved Gippsland more than the place where I worked, so I stayed.

My position was a strange one. It seemed to me that as a teacher I had to offer something Gippsland itself couldn't provide, while, after a first year of struggle and contempt, I had fallen in love with the region. I explored its nooks and crannies at every opportunity, I wrote my weekly column for the newspaper, but I kept up my contacts in Melbourne, fearing that love of the local might become my identity.

I was delighted when David and Joan Armfield, or other Melbourne friends came down to stay, because I wanted to see Gippsland turned into art. David painted, George Bell took photos, Peter Glass and Vane Lindesay came down and I took them to places they'd never have found for themselves. There was a bushwalking club in Bairnsdale, and though its reports could be found in the newspaper, I never joined. Their enthusiasm for the wildflowers they found was somehow at odds with my own enthusiasm for the bush and its many rewards. It's hard for me now to recapture my attitudes at that time in order to examine them. I think I wanted the privileges of almost-royalty in return for the work I would do for Gippsland or those of its population who attended the tech. My years at Melbourne Grammar had steeped me in the concept of *noblesse oblige*, that is, if you have the privileges of rank you must live in a way that returns the favours. Thus it could be said that an influential aspect of my own schooling shaped the way that I taught when it came to my turn to deliver.

Teachers had a lowly rank in Bairnsdale, as they have almost everywhere. This too is strange. Everybody knows that the child shapes the adult, and therefore those who shape the child are important, but nobody wants to recognise this in any serious way. One of my teaching colleagues commented sourly when she saw people boarding the ocean-going yacht owned by one of Bairnsdale's doctors, 'Six years of university as against my four!' I looked at the yacht and was relieved not to own anything of such value; a vessel of that sort would own its owner. Still, the doctor had the yacht and the yacht meant a prestige unavailable to those who taught. Something in the mature-aged citizens of Gippsland caused them to regard their own

years of upbringing as having been lesser years than they presently enjoyed, and therefore those who worked with their children had chosen to accept the status of those they worked with.

I am talking about a matter of great ambivalence, of course, and day after day I would find myself greeted respectfully by parents who'd heard good things about the school from their children. Invitations, as I said earlier, were always being offered, and often enough accepted. The boys I taught, and the parents of the boys, offered hundreds of opportunities to tap into the Gippsland spread around me.

Bairnsdale, for all its deficiencies, was the educational centre of settlements further east, or in the mountains further north. Boys came down to the tech. from Omeo, Benambra, places along the road to Dargo, from Lakes Entrance and little stops along the line to Orbost. Sometimes they came from further east; there were boys called Balhorn whose parents operated the lighthouse at Gabo Island, out from Mallacoota, but still in sight of land. At an earlier time, they told me, they'd lived on Deal Island, off the coast of Wilson's Promontory, a place I'd learned to love through walking in the summer holidays. I had only to go to the back of the school where I worked to feel the immensity and the unity of Gippsland: at my feet, at the back of the school, was the Mitchell River, and on the horizon was Mount Baldhead, a place I knew through the little Volkswagen I'd bought to go exploring, and through the stories I heard from my friend Sid Merlo and his brothers Pud and Jack. It seemed, as I stood at the back of the school, looking out, that I had in truth discovered much of the history, mystery, learning and lore that I'd sensed when Ken Wong had taken me to Eagle Point, another bluff above the Mitchell, a few miles further along the way to the river's dissolution in the lakes and then the sea.

Life itself, I felt, was in some mysterious way the same, with its peaks, its journey and ending. My artist friends in Melbourne did their best to turn life into art, and I, in Gippsland, what was I doing? Was I simply a transmitter, someone who got learning only to hand it on, or was I going to be an artist too? I thought perhaps I might; I began to

take photographs under the guidance of George Bell, and I began first to dream about, and then to try my hand at writing. I was passionate about music, but it wasn't the music of the citizens' band, nor of the rock groups that pushed brass bands aside during my years in the east. My music was the music of the royal courts of Europe, of the church and of the wealthy classes that built opera houses so they could present what they wanted in suitable splendour. Gippsland was poor by comparison: poor financially and poor in culture, yet what it had, I still wanted to know, and so I went exploring, and so, within myself, inside myself, there was a dialogue: I was teaching them as much as I knew of things they lacked, and they were teaching me what I didn't know about them.

This was a two-sided process, with equal and opposing forces, which I was compelled to balance. How hard I worked to make my students aware of the subtleties - and the simple rules! – of using the language. My immediate superior, and supportive colleague, was Kevin Murray, and he and I put huge amounts of energy into the preparation of our projects. To what avail? Years passed, I married, and I made it my practice to go home at lunchtimes. One day, driving along Main Street, I passed a dilapidated truck, and saw that the owner's name on the door had been hand-painted. It said: "Ross Bros, Fuel Merchants and timber contractors." If you care to count, you will observe that the letter S occurs five times. The Ross brothers, I suspected, must have been taught by a fanatic like me because each occurrence of the letter S was completed by what they thought was the necessary salute of an apostrophe.

I felt I was a bloody fool to be pestering people with such niceties. I felt responsible for the stupidity on the truck door and I felt that the Ross brothers would have been better off without me and my kind.

I was quiet over lunch that day.

**I** referred in the previous section to being married, and in earlier sections to being a young, unmarried man. Between these two

positions lies a developing awareness of who I was and what I was doing in my job.

If I go looking for when this awareness came to me, I find myself recalling a moment when, at the end of a day's work, I was approached in the passage by a young man I'd taught, and liked, a few years earlier. He mentioned a boy who'd just arrived at the school, poorly dressed, with a mixed background, and confusion on his face. He was put in one of my classes and I wondered what, if anything, I'd be able to do for him.

Roy Townsend, the ex-student, told me that this newcomer was in the care of himself and his partner. Roy might have been twenty. He was also the driver of a huge truck, which I saw him handling with skill. I didn't know his partner but I imagined their alliance as having been made simply and with commitment. They'd taken responsibility for a boy the same age as Roy had been when I first knew him. Roy wanted me to know that if any problems arose or anybody needed to know anything, he was the one to contact. He said nothing of how this situation had come about. If he told me any family connection the boy had with him or his partner I don't remember it. What has stayed in my mind was my awareness that Roy had realised that as a man you had to look after people needing someone to take care of them. I thought of the huge truck, and the troubled boy, and I knew I was looking human goodness full in the face. Had I taught Roy? He was teaching me.

It may seem that I am lurching sideways when I say that Roy's adoption of this boy new to the school added a dimension to the problem I spent half my time working on, and half my time avoiding. What was I supposed to be doing? I had a cupboard full of grammatical and punctuational exercises, I had shelves of books the boys could read if they finished their work quickly, I had a variety of tasks designed to train the boys in analysis and expression, I'd read *Macbeth* with them and I'd read James Elroy Flecker's *Hassan*: I'd read bush ballads and Dal Stivens' tales. I'd taken my students through Frank Hardy's

*The Load of Wood* and any number of other stories, but I still wasn't confident, wasn't sure. What was I supposed to be doing, and how well was it going? The dark days of my first year were behind me and I was sure that I was as good as most, but the restlessness within me was more than a striving to do better. It was a need to know something that I couldn't find in myself but didn't know where else to search.

What I needed, I now believe, was a sophisticated community validation of what was being done. The inspectors had kind things to say, I received a promotion (Class 4 teacher to Class 3!) within the school, and the townspeople seemed to approve, but these, welcome as they might be, were not the signals I was looking for. What I needed, I now think, was a curricular definition inside which I could work happily, freely, and improvisationally, and the structure, the framework itself needed to have some means of assessment – self-assessment – so that one's performance – mine and the students' – could be checked to see how well everything was being done. If there's something you can't achieve, you must know it before you can change your approach. I was sailing on a sea of my own enthusiasms, and I was good enough as a performer to have the right enthusiasms much of the time, but things that were stimulating for me were not necessarily the best things for me to be feeding into community life.

Well, perhaps they were, but the community was unrepresented except by the boys themselves, and they weren't well-informed as to their needs!

Again and again I remembered Brian Hone, the headmaster who'd arrived at Melbourne Grammar for my last year, telling me one day in the quadrangle when I told him I was going to be a teacher in a government school, 'What they need is a hundred good headmasters, and I don't think they're going to get them.' I hadn't taught under the sort of leadership that I knew he was by then giving his famous school, and it was frustrating …

Then a strange thing happened. I was in Melbourne for a weekend, and I took my friend Vane Lindesay, black and white artist, cartoonist

and book designer, to have a look at my old school. There was a cricket match in progress. Brian Hone came past and I introduced him to Vane, and vice versa. Hone was most affable. He wanted to know where I was working and what I was doing. He seemed interested. Then he wrote to me, suggesting that I might like to return to Melbourne Grammar as a teacher. I wrote back, thanking him, and saying I needed to think about it. I'd like to see what the school was like these days.

A couple of weeks later I got a day off and went to Melbourne. I looked around my old school and saw that it had changed considerably. I was impressed. I lunched with the headmaster and his wife. There was an attractive young woman present and I realised that I was being examined too. Manners? Interest? Direction of my sexuality? All that sort of thing.

I had a decision to make. I drove back on the Sunday afternoon into darkly forested Gippsland. About half an hour's drive from Bairnsdale, near Providence Ponds, for those who know it, I recognised the car behind me. David and Mary Provan. I stopped. I had told them why I was going to Melbourne, so they asked me how it had gone. I said I was very enthusiastic about the job but I wasn't going to take it. 'I'll wait a day or two just to be sure, but I'll have to write to them and say thanks but no thanks.' We chatted by the side of the highway, then we drove on in our two cars. I wrote to Brian Hone and he wrote back graciously. I made a comparison between the finely-tuned orchestra he'd developed and the bush band that I was playing my part in, and said that I thought I should stick to what I was doing. That drew another letter from my former headmaster, gracious and thoughtful as ever, but … that question again …

… what was I doing?

**I** was growing up. That was the simple answer, but I could never put the question simply to myself. Complexities confronted me at every turn. One of them was male madness. I was teaching boys, and boys,

when put on their own, civilised themselves in ways that were foreign to girls. Memories flood in. At the Bairnsdale Show one year I see a boy I'd taught a few years earlier – tall, well-mannered, well-spoken. His face had scars from hair-line to chin. 'What happened, Kelvin?'

'I was in a car crash near Rosedale. You remember …' and he reminded me of the details which, of course, I'd read in the local paper. 'Oh well,' I say, 'it looks like you're recovering pretty well.' Is he? Or is that my formula to hide my shock? I didn't come to Gippsland to see my students – my *generation*, I am inclined to think – destroying themselves. And yet they do.

I am in the Albion Hotel, a place where I like to drink, when I notice half a dozen boys I taught a few years before. They are all in suits. I realise that they've come from the funeral of two of their mates, killed in a car crash a few nights before, when they were speeding through a fog at Wy Yung and collected another car. As I drove home I remembered another night, three or four weeks earlier, when I'd gone to Manfred's coffee shop with a friend and noticed two of my ex-students in the street outside, shirts off, leaping up to touch a light fixture. They were slightly drunk, full of energy, and waiting for something to give direction to their lives. One of them was dead.

People were killing themselves on the roads all the time. Driving home from Bruthen one night I had to slow down because there was a group of people on the road. I stopped when I realised they were gathered around a body. A man I didn't know told me, 'I came over that rise, I was going at a reasonable speed, and I saw this abo in the middle of the road. I couldn't believe it! I was on him too quick to be able to do anything.' I asked him if the black man had been drinking. 'He must've, though if he was drinking on the road, I didn't see him. Silly bastard! Shouldn't have been there!' Then I spoke to another of my ex-students who'd been in the car behind the one that killed the black man; he'd been in a serious accident himself not long before, as I knew … I hope I'm making it clear that when you live in a rural area you know a great deal of the underground life of the community of

which you're a part. I had started my career in Gippsland thinking that education was the way to make a better world.

Perhaps. It was clear to me after a few years in Gippsland that better worlds lay forever around the corner, but were never here. The best that one might do would raise the standard – and how was that to be judged? – by an immeasurable degree. The world went on its usual ways whatever a few dedicated people might do. I went to a dinner dance one Saturday night at the Paynesville Hotel-Motel. There were lots of young people there; their time, as a generation, was at hand. Music played, people sang. A strong young man, taller than me, introduced me to his fiancée, who was blind. I sat with them before going back to the table of my friends. I told my wife about the 'boy' I'd re-met, and of his brave decision to take as his partner someone who couldn't see. 'I found her charming,' I said. 'She was very much in love.'

Time passed. I caught a story in one of the pubs that the young man had separated from the blind girl and married someone else. She would be heart-broken. I wondered what had gone on in the mind of the young man who'd recognised me before I recognised him. Had he decided that life would be too difficult with a blind partner? Had he …

So much for my learning. It had limits, and so had I. What was I supposed to be doing, then? This question seems stranger each time I raise it, but I was ambitious in that I wanted to be a good teacher and nobody was setting a standard for me, except myself and my friend Kevin Murray. Our relationship was one of rivalry and cooperation, and we were the only two who understood each other. People thought well of us, the school was well regarded for the strength of its staff, but we were without the dialogue that we needed. If we'd been at the high school we'd have found ourselves entwined in those influences reaching down the school from the year 11 and 12 exams at the top, entwined also in the requirements of respectability in a school where boys and girls went through together. We were free of these things, we

had almost more freedom than we knew what to do with – though not quite! – yet I, at least, needed something more.

Then one of our inspectors retired, and he was replaced by a man called Bob Dobell. Bob produced a book of language exercises and Jim Docherty, another inspector, recommended it. Useful. I looked at a copy and thought it tedious. I had a cupboard full of exercises I thought better. I told Jim Bob's book was boring. He listened tolerantly, being used to me by then. Looking back, I think that Bob and Jim knew that there were plenty of teachers in technical schools who were as lost as I'd been when I started and they felt, both of them, that providing something useful to fall back on was a good thing to do.

It was, I suppose, except that I had decided some years before that I wasn't falling back! I was going forward and taking my students with me. The trouble, and I know that I knew it at the time, gnawing away inside me, was that this laudable ambition had turned into something of a crusade. I'd set out to make the world better and there was no instrument, no widely accepted agreement, to restrain me, or better, to assist all of those who taught in the sorts of places that I did. I was all alone, apart from Kevin Murray and a growing band of ex-tech. boys and their parents who approved of what I was doing, and I wanted, it was a strongly felt personal need, some over-arching standard against which I could measure what I was doing. I wanted a statewide, socially approved, profoundly examined and widely discussed curriculum. Someone, somewhere, should know, should be laying down, what we were all supposed to do!

If I could go back to the beginning, Bairnsdale 1956, and start again, I'd wave a wand and bring the things I mentioned into being. Teaching would be simple then! Perhaps I should try to look for the difficulties in what I have proposed.

Certain things are obvious. People want the best for their children, though what this means is rarely defined. Most parents, unable to articulate what they want for their children, grasp on words like

'opportunity', and this makes them willing to accept the idea of educational richness. Their children's days at school (parents rarely use the word 'curriculum') should be *rich* in a variety of experiences. The child should be helped to *grow*. This process, if it occurs, is usually curtailed by the entry on the scene of society's requirements. The child can't be left unquestioned forever. Kids have to be sorted out. They veer into medicine, finance, the law, horse-breaking or what you will. Enter qualifications. People won't be certified professionally unless they've passed the relevant exams. Enter competition, specialised coaching, expensive private schools. Success must be achieved and, if you're well off and the kids are yours, hang the expense!

Very few people in Bairnsdale, and none at the tech., could say that! We were a poor school, our boys' families ranged from poor to battlers to mildly respectable, though not a few of them had family names traced through the region's history. Many people who'd hacked out a niche for themselves amid Gippsland's ranges had stayed and looked like staying longer. This was something I liked, having come from a country background myself. Driving about my new region, I would see bread and mail delivery boxes at farm gates, and the names would resonate in my mind, names I'd read in my researches for the historical column I wrote. Forces coming in from outside, from the great metropolis and through the radio, the dailies that I saw in the newsagents' and on television of course, overlaid and appeared to repress anything local, but Gippsland, I felt was fighting back pretty well, in holding onto and maintaining its identity. 'A frontier town, dear boy,' Hal Porter used to say, and it was, if you looked at it from one street back from the Main Street; yes, it was respectability propped up by all the usual contrivances, but still it stood, and its boys and girls, when they qualified and went away, did as well as most.

This meant, perhaps, that the richness that people wanted for their children's education, was local, and that the success, not necessarily the same thing, would be achieved when they went away. In this way of seeing things, the dividing line between richness of personal

development and later financial and professional success lay along the boundaries of Gippsland. It was a convenient dichotomy for those who wanted to think no further, and it had a certain appeal. I found myself revelling in Gippsland as my years in the region wore on. It was hard to imagine being in a better place … yet the artistic and literary ideals that sustained me came from somewhere else. This divided me. I wanted to steep myself in Gippsland, and I did, and I wanted to be at the centre of things, of thought, and that wasn't in the eastern mountains, or the lighthouse at Gabo Island either. It may be that the curricular yearnings expressed a little earlier were no more than yearnings for the divisions within myself to be closed. I had to grow up, I had to develop, Gippsland was where all this was happening, I owed it a debt, I couldn't separate my inner processes from the place where they were happening, and those curricular yearnings were, I suppose, a yearning for the wisdom and objectivity I hoped some day to attain.

Yet the school, the boys, their parents, my teaching colleagues, even the inspectors visiting annually, expected me to have answers ready. I taught, day by day. I cut out hundreds of cartoons from the Saturday Evening Post, distributed them among my students and told them to write the story of what they saw. Sometimes they were pedestrian, occasionally they were brilliant. They saw that it was easy to say who was doing what and who said what to whom, but far from easy to do so while making the joke in a new way, with words. Words! We played with dictionaries, which I wanted them to use as freely as footballs or cricket bats, and they learned to use them. I showed them how to extract something of the derivation of words from those same dictionaries. I was writing, in the spare bedroom of the home I'd bought, as often and as hard as I could. Gippsland's tales had entered my mind and I was trying to get them down, sometimes on epic scale. I was striving to be a different man myself, a writer, and my teaching shared the struggles and the occasional triumphs when the boys wrote well, as from time to time they did.

Becoming a writer was both a frightening challenge and an inner strength. Some of this must have been transmitted to the boys, whether I knew it or not. Many of them responded. Looking back I see a young man with considerable hauteur and a dangerous vulnerability who was probably lucky to come through the struggle.

Eventually I found myself mellowing. I'd seen the best of Gippsland and if I stayed any longer, I'd be overtaken by sleepiness, smugness, self-satisfaction: I had to have new challenges, or be swallowed by passivity. I prepared to leave. I discussed this with the visiting inspectors and one suggested I might find what I wanted at Preston, so I applied for that school, and the appointment came. I was climbing into a trap, but wasn't smart enough to realise until too late.

**M**y wife and I, with our tiny son, moved to Melbourne. We bought a house within easy drive of work: close enough, but in another place. I went to Preston and my heart sank. One of my reasons for choosing the school was that it had a Class 2 head of department, and I was a Class 3 teacher; this meant that I'd have no administrative responsibilities intruding on my teaching.

Or so I thought. When I got to my new school I found that my head of department was about to take long service leave, and I'd be left in charge, the very thing I'd wanted to avoid. His drinking was out of control and, an ex-serviceman, he was, in his way of looking at women, hardly more mature than the boys he was teaching. When he left, I wasn't sure that I wanted him back. The administration was quite certain. They demanded his transfer, and the inspectors, who had recommended Preston to me, concurred. I never saw the man again. The newcomer was to take charge!

Classes at Preston's years 10 and 11 section were ability-graded from A to K: the A grades were ruthlessly, mercenarily clever; the lower grades were, shall we say, raucous. Nobody had bought anything in years for the humanities subjects and it was quickly apparent that the administration regarded money spent on humanities as money wasted.

Why would you buy them books when they didn't know what to do with them?

The library had been closed because the librarian had left and not been replaced. I asked why not? Fellow teachers told me hoary jokes about boys putting things over the former librarian. I thumbed through a few of the books on the shelves. There were toilet-wall graffiti on every second page. I persuaded the administration to advertise for a librarian and Noreen Donegan was appointed. She looked at the library and she looked at me. We both grinned. We were at rock bottom and we had to make others recognise the fact. I arranged for a truck to come to the library on a certain day. I told Noreen to get it loaded as quickly as possible. 'Don't stop for anybody. Get everything off the shelves and the truck off the premises.' It was done. The library was bare. Noreen and I went to the city centre and picked fabric for curtains, then I went to the administration again. I asked for money for the curtains and suggested that they'd better give me some more money so there would be some books. We wouldn't open the library until it contained something the students wanted to read.

I suspect that the administration's disapproval of my actions was a form of approval. Money was forthcoming, and the library reopened. The bottom of the pit was now a little way beneath us, and we were climbing. One way or another a few promising teachers joined us. Then another opportunity presented itself. Some sporting function created a half day when there would be no classes. I suggested we have a claret afternoon at Brian and Diana Simpson's, an historic house the couple were renting in Carlton. A dozen or so gathered for the afternoon. My wife went into the city, shopping, and our new daughter was in my care. This probably sounds irrelevant to my Preston story but the presence of young life links closely in my mind with what our group was thinking about that afternoon. An outsider would have said that all we did was drink and talk, but we were bonding to give each other strength. It was going to take years but something good was going to replace the shambles we'd inherited. What would this new thing be?

I don't think any of us had much idea but we were going ahead with spirit.

Two days later I was asked where the humanities staff had been on the afternoon in question. My answer was that we'd had a social afternoon planning our future. This was at least partially true. I was told with scathing sarcasm that teachers should not absent themselves without the prior permission of the man rebuking me, the aforementioned Keith Eltham. It did not escape me that his rebuke was essentially a face-saving exercise, because none of us lost any pay for taking ourselves off duty. I also sensed that knowledge of our disappearance would go no further. The work of rebuilding had begun.

**W**hat a struggle. I'd spent years improvising in Bairnsdale and now I was improvising again. This time there were a number of us, improvising together. Teachers left and new teachers arrived, but we grew a little stronger, day by day. It's hard, I think, to make anybody not personally familiar with the situation understand the feeling many teachers had that they faced scarcely soluble problems with no prospect of assistance. To lose control of one's students was personal defeat. One's worth was tested every time we faced our classes, many of whom were sullen or resentful. Other students, well backed by their parents, had expectations that were too high to be satisfied by a school that had no tradition in the humanities. I thought occasionally of the bluestone buildings on the other side of the city where I'd been taught myself, and where I could, if I'd so chosen, be working. I didn't regret my choice to stay with the state system, because I accepted the challenge. It must be possible to do something?

Enter political dislocation. I've already mentioned that buildings at various points around Zwar park housed a girls' secondary school, a junior boys' school (years 7 – 9) and a section for older boys (years 10 – 11). There was also a senior technical college, something that had developed out of the earlier School of Mines system throughout the

state. These sections ran separately under the overall management of a council and rarely-sighted director. Then the federal government of the day decided that the various teachers' colleges, senior technical colleges etc around the nation should acquire parity with universities, the first step being that they would have their entry point post-year 12. This decision was undoubtedly a good one but the implementation of it was left to state and/or local authorities. More decisions had to be made, usually by people who had more ambition than understanding. The first problem was that the junior technical schools ended at year 11, so some sort of bridging year had to be created so that those who'd chosen to do their secondary education in technical schools were not locked out of tertiary education. I am speaking of a situation whereby there was to be one (varied) tertiary system sitting on top of a secondary system that had two major routes. If this is confusing, be ready for more.

While we at Saint Georges Road Preston (and others all over Victoria) were still dealing with the changes I've mentioned, a later federal government created a new stream in education, called TAFE (Technical and Further Education). What this was supposed to mean was something to be worked out in practice over quite a few years. TAFE was clearly intended to handle vocational education – trade training, etc - but it also found itself picking up the numerous growths and developments that had arisen to compensate for gaps in the standard secondary offerings. This is not easy for the general public to understand, so let me take the reader back to the 1870s, when Australia's states legislated for free, compulsory and secular education. This is now regarded, correctly enough, as an historic development, but the concept of compulsion carried with it an age limit, after which young people could leave education and go to work. Higher secondary education, and the ensuing university education, were beyond the aspirations of most. Those who continued beyond the compulsory years had separated themselves from the mass. This means that the states, whatever their differences, were operating two

systems, one providing mass education for all, and the other offering a grab-bag of the various mixtures of education and training necessary to provide qualified doctors, lawyers, musicians, accountants, opticians and so on. To these professional training faculties we must add the various activities conducted inside arts faculties all over the land, the arts faculties offering a general humanist education to complement the more vocationally directed courses.

I have already referred more than once to the problem faced by humanities teachers in technical schools, divorced as they were from any connection with these arts faculties, although needing to connect with them in some way, however indirect. In the period I am describing, the first half of the 1970s, authorities at commonwealth and state level were trying – once again – to rationalise the confusion they'd inherited.

TAFE colleges were being created. Year 12 classes were being set up where they hadn't previously existed. New tertiary institutions were sorting themselves out in relation to established universities. Educators themselves were striving for a new professionalism, and much of the old on-the-job training, of nurses, for instance, was being relocated to within the tertiary institutions to which they'd been, perhaps loosely, linked. None of what I am describing should have been too difficult to accomplish, and over time much of it was, but the public, I fear, never understood what was going on and neither did many of the state's teachers, because nobody in authority was articulating for them what was happening or what new balance was being created. Perhaps nobody knew?

I certainly didn't. I find myself in sympathy with police forces, who, like teachers, have to accommodate themselves to the wishes of governments which don't always or entirely understand what they're doing. Police officers, I'm sure, must ask themselves of some new piece of legislation that's being debated, 'Do they want this enforced? Or is it just their wish to have a lot of noise made over the matter before it's quietly put aside?'

I am trying to make a little sense out of a period that was confusing for those of us who lived through it, and I think it's important to do so because things today seem only a little clearer. I began my career in a junior technical school. Junior technical schools led to senior technical schools. These two types of education, taken together, provided much of what was, in the age when they began, vocational training. Vocational training was clearly defined, and along lines of social class, as separate from that part of the culture which led people either to arts (humanities) learning, or those degree courses which qualified people (men, mostly, in those days) for professional training. Notice that vocational training for the professions was not described as vocational training, a term normally used in reference to what went on in technical schools, where people learned what they did because of who they were! This social rather than educational distinction between education and training bedevils education and will do so, I think, into the foreseeable future.

And yet again, it may not. It may be that the electronic revolution which is changing our culture will eliminate the distinctions between socially desirable and socially undesirable, or inferior, strands of learning. Learning is after all an outcome of a culture as well as its description. Our society has eliminated the old-style garbos and dunnycart men whose job told us what they were. Polluting jobs have been shifted offshore to China. Our society is not what it was thirty years ago, and a far cry from what it was in the 1870s, those days of free compulsory and secular education – up to a point!

**W**hat a struggle. There's little need to describe how I and others found our way through the confusion of the times, except that a few incidents here and there point up the difficulties everyone in education was facing. Students have a way of making teachers confront problems they've been avoiding. At an early stage of the upheavals I have been describing, I was talking to a year 11 girl in the library, still in the hands of Noreen Donegan, and now with its curtains. This girl, one of the

most talented people we had, told me she would be leaving school to be married. I was amazed. She wasn't pregnant; her parents had decided that she was the right age to be married, and that was that. A young man had been chosen. I sketched an alternative future, including a degree from Latrobe University, not far away. She shook her head. When her parents told her to leave, she'd be leaving. I ran through my arguments, which she had clearly thought of herself, but said she wouldn't be able to convince her parents. They wanted things done in the way they'd been done in the part of Yugoslavia they'd come from. I said they were in Australia now. She said nothing. They weren't, or not in their minds. I offered to talk to them myself, so they'd realise how gifted their daughter was, and how far she was capable of going. She shook her head. She didn't want me visiting her parents. No!

She left. I never saw her again.

More girls came to what had been a masculine world, yet nobody set about changing the appearance of the place. The central quadrangle remained the prison yard it had always been. Gardening, which could have made a difference, didn't take place. People who were busy might have said they didn't notice, but it's what we aren't aware of that's shaping us, all the time. To be unaware is to be in the hands of forces you haven't faced up to. Preston, as a whole, was much the same. Gardens were on the meanest scale. Saint Georges Road, potentially a boulevarde to the city, was dreary, with a tram line up the middle and not much else. The Town Hall, red brick with white encrustations, looked like an indigestible cake. The place was hotter and colder than the central city because further from the bay, and more exposed to winds from the north, cold in winter and fiery in summer. To drive about was to feel that the inhabitants had been reduced in mind, spirit and aspiration the moment they entered the suburb, if not before. Did it attract only those who'd given up hope, or never had it, aesthetically?

I found myself yearning, at times, for Gippsland's mountains, lakes, amazing places. The people of Preston appeared to have

trapped themselves in a grid of fences and modest homes into which fed all the communicative devices of modern life. Higher income and higher status, if they could be achieved, were the only way out. The students were smart enough to see that education might get them somewhere – which meant somewhere else. Strangely enough, it was when I began to realise how cynical they were that the transformation that had taken place inside me, years ago, began to happen again. In Gippsland, I had begun to align myself with my students once I fell in love with the place which they too loved, while realising, occasionally, some of them, that the beauty and isolation could be a trap.

In Preston, the students saw the trap well enough: where was the escape? They were more adventurous than Gippslanders. If the qualified people who came from somewhere else said this is what you do to get out, they'd do it! Yet there were other traps inside the process too. Not long after the library discussion with the girl whose parents forced her to leave, and marry, I noticed another girl in the passage surrounding the prison yard. She had tears in her eyes. She was fair, beautiful, and sought after in a school where girls were still a minority. She should, I thought, have been happy, but then I had never been female and wanted by too many. I asked her if something was wrong. She shook her head. Had something happened? No. Would she like to say what was upsetting her? There was nothing … I went to find a female teacher to talk to her, but when my colleague arrived, the girl was gone. Home? I had no idea, and dared not ask her the following day when I saw her next. I was becoming aware that the educational system in which I served was a male construct, which meant it was not only unsatisfactory but imprisoning for the females who came into it, transforming it of course, but at some, perhaps considerable, cost to themselves.

Male and female. My own education at Melbourne Grammar had been ghastly in this respect, and the years that followed had been only marginally better. Men, and this included boys, had become so used to talking noisily to each other that they'd deafened themselves to

the female half of human discourse. Women, it seemed to men, were, paradoxically, endlessly talkative without ever saying anything. All they did was chatter! And this from boys who made so much noise you could hardly hear yourself think! The first seeds of doubt about myself as a male human being began to creep in. The sixties wave of free love, drugs, personal irresponsibility and social freedom had largely washed over me, when the following wave of revitalised feminism crashed on top of us. You may wonder what this has to do with an account of learning in one man's life but I hope I have been consistent so far in showing that the fact that learning takes place all the time leaves us a little more able to consider what happens and what should happen in the formal education system. Systems, of course, are social, so that if society is changing then education is changing too, whether anybody realises or not. Strangely, it was when my teaching life at Preston was at its most chaotic that some clarity began to emerge, because, largely, of a simplification that was to take place.

The chaos first, and then the clarity. I have already set out how the situation I found on arriving at Preston Technical School was unsatisfactory, but was at least fairly simple. Then things began to move. The senior technical college announced that it would shift to new premises further north, and only students with a year 12 pass would be able to enter. What would students do in year 11? Who would teach them what in year 12? Methods of managing these matters existed in high schools and private schools, but not in what had been the technical system, and humanities teachers were, as usual, the most confused because nobody had ever had guidance for them. It was assumed that they would know what to do, or they would improvise, or they would copy what went on in high schools. Or something!

I at least was used to improvising, having done it for years, and I decided that I would teach without curriculum, responding to the questions that arose in my classes with further classes focussing on each area of ignorance or need as it arose. This technique depended

on forcing students to confront what they didn't know or understand. The students quickly defeated me by turning up for a few lessons then staying away for a day or two. I couldn't create the continuity on which my approach depended. Back to square one!

Sometimes they defeated me in other ways. I had a talented group of art students, some of whom wrote very well. They were certainly thinkers, but it seemed to me that they were confused in their appreciation of aesthetics. Most of them thought they had taste but few of them could say what it was. So I collected twenty or thirty things from my own home and from friends, ranging from quality (Orrefors wine glasses) to kitsch (ghastly tee-shirts). I had egg cups, tea cups, knives and spoons, flower vases … et cetera. I put these things on a table in front of me and invited the students to choose two things to write about, one in good taste and one in bad; they were to justify their opinions.

This went well, on one level, and on another it was disastrous. They were art students, and young. They loved everything kitsch. The things that I thought possessed quality, like a Swedish wine glass or a French coffee cup, meant nothing to them. They loved things I thought awful. I was glad I'd put everything on the table in front of me because I could tell that the bottom half of my collection would have disappeared had I not been there to guard it. I argued with my class but knew I wasn't getting anywhere. Phillip Brophy, the most articulate of them, began to tell me about the musician Lou Reed, and how his music had developed until his latest album was nothing but noise; Phillip thought this was great. He lent me Lou Reed's albums, including the latest. Noise. No aesthetic discipline. No attempt to make contact with an audience via shared understandings of the language of music. No, of course not, Phillip told me. Lou leads, others follow; that's how you create your audience if you're any good.

I, of course, had Mozart and the courts of Europe in the back of my mind and Phillip had commercial pop showing him ways to think. The rest of the group were closer to Phillip's thinking than to

mine. You had to get ahead somehow and it didn't much matter how it was done. You needed to be smart! I now think that the dialogue I attempted to start with these art students needed to be followed up by their other teachers, but no mechanism existed to develop and extend the overall course design. There was drawing, life drawing, painting, 3D work, ceramics etc, taken by separate instructors with little or no effort to reconcile the differences between them. That took place, if at all, inside the students' minds. Art students, of course, are notorious for rejecting whatever they're supposed to respect but my experience was being repeated across the whole of this largely undirected year 11. Nobody knew what was going on, teachers were working hard to give students good experiences, but nobody and nothing was holding things together, let alone formulating something better than a collection of improvisatory efforts.

Time passed and then the teachers at Saint Georges Road, many of them having emerged from the ranks of secondary technical teachers, took over the job of devising and teaching tertiary orientation programs (TOP). Over a number of years this became a very good program but thinking back to our earliest efforts makes me squirm. We could hardly have been less prepared, except insofar as our years in the system that wasn't a system had made us good at what I might call life-raft teaching. Hang on, and don't let yourself sink! No matter how awful things might be, if examined by a serious conscience, keep talking success! Confidence comes out of believing in yourself! At the end of one year's teaching we knew we had to be ready for something new the following year. If we wanted something to guide us in teaching at year 12 level, then there was the experience of those who'd done it in the previous years; they would accredit whatever it was we did, so long as they were satisfied … or so it was said: we knew they'd be too busy at the new institute to be bothered devising courses for us. What would we do?

A few of us sat around in late November and asked that question of ourselves. We had to teach English, so we'd follow the system of

the previous years – each class would do whatever its teacher asked, and put together a folio of writing for assessment at the end of the year. Other subjects? A few of us thought of something we might care to teach, and sketched in a modest amount of content – enough to get the year started, and after that … well, we were used to improvising.

If you think I'm describing a shambles, you're right, yet, unpredictably, something very good developed. Time, time … it's something teachers rarely have, and systems rarely provide. Things are always being thrown together, people are making valiant efforts and students, here and there, are inspired to do marvellous things because they see glimpses of what's being asked of them. Success is scattered and it's a joyous miracle when it arrives, but something in me can't stop calling for a less chancy, more certain system with some reliability in it, so that the best that's obtainable in education is the norm rather than the opportune.

That was the chaos, and it hasn't ended yet, but let us now go in search of the clarity that came later.

The period I want to describe lasted about a decade and a half, and it seemed, as my colleagues and I worked consistently on what we were doing, that we were climbing towards a standard and intensity of purpose that should be a base level for all teachers, at all levels, in the state system, and if a state doesn't have a system of education it isn't a state. A nation is not a nation unless it knows how to manage its young for the benefit of both itself and those widely differing individuals who constitute it. But these feelings of mine are I suspect in decline. Pride and/or belief in the nation state is giving way to an almost unquestioned faith in the economy. The financial world subsumes all others. A transaction is more important than the transactors. I have a feeling that the period and processes I'm about to describe will seem like a vanished world. So be it.

The sixties are often seen as a time of loosening morals. The changes of that decade were late in arriving in hard-boiled Preston,

where migrant families were replacing old-style Aussies who were moving further out – or in. Secondary teachers, most of them still young, couldn't help looking to the remaining tertiary people who'd been left behind. There was an American among them, teaching sociology. He'd had an affair with a student, then, when she left, with another the following year. This was not obvious but it was known, and it was discomforting. He flew back to America for the long vacation, then, when the rest of us were back at work and he hadn't arrived, he sent a telegram: he'd be a week late. Two of us, Peter McDonald and I, neither of us interested in administration, were sharing the job of head of department – which meant, for most of the time, that nobody was doing it. Peter and I studied the telegram, those affairs in the back of our minds. We told the administration we didn't want him back. This was accepted. When he returned he was told, as politely as Peter and I could manage, that he wasn't needed. His position had been filled.

This may seem a very minor incident but I bring it out of memory's cupboard because it tells a good deal about the professionalism of teachers at the time. Most teachers found it very hard to make judgements about each other's fitness. The age of inspectors was only a year or two behind us, and teacher unions spoke about the professionalism of teachers as if standards were never breached. We were teaching students of an age such that it was rarely necessary for teachers to exert old-fashioned authority. To be interesting was thought to be enough. If students performed poorly, they got low marks, and high marks were needed for anybody wanting to go on. By the time they reached us our students, we assumed, had their eyes fixed on the future. Or so we liked to think.

There were cracks everywhere. Students doing certificate courses in applied science (leading, perhaps, to nursing) or secretarial studies came to us for English, and nobody told us what they had to be taught. I think there was a general, and contradictory, assumption that they would be taught, in English, everything they weren't taught in the more tightly circumscribed subjects and they would be taught *correct*

English because secretaries needed better English than their bosses, whose letters might need correction. Most humanities teachers, then as now, liked to operate as high up the feed-chain of style and ideas as possible, so that the hack work of getting people's subjects and verbs in agreement, or their singulars and plurals coinciding, was cheerfully left behind. I was myself punctilious in correcting every minor error, and often received complaints from students, who said that my biro marks were humiliations inflicted without cause. I would say, 'You need to eliminate these defects, so you need to know about them first,' but was usually the only one convinced.

The tertiary orientation programs I've referred to were also taught in a small number of local technical schools, and when teachers assembled at the end of the year for the assessment of students' folders, a division opened up between the now-TAFE teachers at Preston and the junior tech. teachers from elsewhere. The latter felt their main job was to encourage, to be sympathetic, and to applaud whenever anything quarter-way decent was achieved. Preston people were aware that the students we sent on to university had to do well when they got there, otherwise we would soon be out of a job. Thus we returned to that old difficulty in teaching - handling the transition from support and encouragement, with the teacher behind and beside the student, taking the student's part, and, the other inescapable role of the teacher, laying down society's demands for young people to meet. Teaching at the year 12 level, we were, Preston teachers knew, inescapably on society's side, however much encouragement, sympathy and support we might give.

I think we reconciled ourselves to this position by thinking of ourselves as giving the students a way out of a society which would drag them down if they didn't rise to its challenges. So we were in the position of being critical, perhaps fiercely so, of the surrounding society, while thinking that any student who couldn't find a way to a reasonable sort of island in a stormy sea was probably beyond help. The trap with this attitude was that it allowed teachers to feel that they

occupied a moral high ground, which is always dangerous. I don't think we ever solved that problem; indeed, the more successful we became at our work, the more the danger infected us.

Looking back now on those early years of tertiary preparation work, I see any number of messes and muddles which came about because we were still struggling toward a professional way of working, but I also remember many happy hours in what had once been a trade workshop, seated around clusters of tables, talking our way through books and ideas on a level we'd never expected to reach. I was taking a unit on the poetry of Bruce Dawe[1] with a group whose parents, many of them, had been new arrivals not so many years before, and I thought there was enough social commentary in Dawe's poetry to make his themes as recognisable as his distinctive voice. One of my students was a Greek lad whom I called Lennie Pascoe because he resembled a New South Wales cricketer of that name. Lennie, as I shall call him, loved Bruce Dawe's poems, and as we read them, one after another, his gasps and murmurs told me that doors were opening in his mind. We read *homecoming*:

> All day, day after day, they're bringing them home,
> they're picking them up, those they can find, and bringing them home,
> they're bringing them in, piled on the hulls of Grants, in trucks, in convoys,
>
> they're zipping them up in green plastic bags,
> they're tagging them now in Saigon, in the mortuary coolness
> they're giving them names …

The Vietnam war had divided Australia, and like many of my colleagues I had taken part in marches through our city, calling for the war to end, and I don't think Lennie or the others in his group had ever imagined that poetry could be so pressing. Or so funny:

> When children are born in Victoria
> they are wrapped in the club-colours, laid in beribboned cots,
> having already begun a lifetime's barracking.

Carn, they cry, Carn … feebly at first
while parents playfully tussle with them
for possession of a rusk: Ah, he's a little Tiger! (And they are …)

One that never failed to move us was Dawe's *elegy for drowned children*:

Yet even an old acquisitive king must feel
Remorse poisoning his joy, since he allows
Particular boys each evening to arouse
From leaden-lidded sleep, softly to steal

Away to the whispering shore, there to plunge in,
And fluid as porpoises swim upward, upward through the dividing
Waters until, soon, each back home is striding
Over thresholds of welcome dream with wet and moonlit skin.

Every poet is a voice and none can claim to be more authentic than the next, but I felt that Bruce Dawe had shown Lennie's group that there were aspects of their society that they hadn't known existed until his poetry had been put before them. I felt proud of playing my part in this, and proudest of all when a similar thing happened with the American Emily Dickinson[2].

There were, I think, sixteen of us in one of the smaller rooms. We squeezed in with no room to spare. I told them a little about Emily's reclusive life, then we began to read. It was a wintry day outside, and windy. Clouds skittered across the sky, giving us alternating bursts of light and gloom on the tall, industrial window. Leaves of two large bushes brushed against the pane in the wind; we were warm inside, from a heater. Something about the day gave us empathy with the writing, the miracle happened and it seemed that we were inside the poetry and it was in us. I chose carefully the order in which we read the poems, making sure that one led to the next. Towards the end of the session we came to …

Because I could not stop for Death -
He kindly stopped for me –

The Carriage held but just Ourselves –
And Immortality.

We slowly drove – He knew no haste
And I had put away
My labor and my leisure too,
For his Civility –

We passed the School, where Children strove
At Recess – in the Ring –
We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain –
We passed the Setting Sun –

Or rather – He passed Us –
The Dews drew quivering and chill –
For only Gossamer, my Gown –
My Tippet – only Tulle –

We paused before a House that seemed
A Swelling of the Ground –
The Roof was scarcely visible –
The Cornice – in the Ground –

Since then – 'tis Centuries – and yet
Feels shorter than the Day
I first surmised the Horses' Heads
Were toward Eternity -

We sat back, silent. We looked at our bits of paper, and the leaves brushing against the glass, sunlit, then darkened again. Nobody said anything. We got out of our chairs, nodded to each other, and left the room. Emily's spirit had been with us, speaking, and there was no need for us to talk. What had we to say, when a great poet had been present in our room?

**A**s any teacher will tell you, such moments come rarely. Students cheated at times, in a variety of ways. The systems we were using at Preston TAFE College, as it became, had been created by us and we had

to defend them. Late one year a teacher came to me with the English folder submitted for assessment by one of her students. One of the essays, she was sure, had been written by someone else. I looked at the folder and agreed. The girl whose folder it was denied the charge. She was put in a room on her own and told to write another piece on the same topic. We hadn't been as careful as we should have, because someone passing told her teacher that she was copying something she had in her bag. Her teacher checked, and she was. The student went home in tears and came back with her father. He was very uncomfortable, but told me his daughter had never done anything dishonest in her life. I felt sorry for him but said we wouldn't accept the disputed essay. She had to show us work that we could accept was hers. Father and daughter went away.

A couple of days later, reading of the folders began. There had been a good deal of discussion among the staff of this matter, and I think we were all very relieved when a teacher came across the disputed essay in another student's folder, where it was in style and clearly belonged. The first girl had been lying, as we had thought all along.

A year or two later there was another, more arduous, case. A girl from a Greek family put in an essay which I found puzzling. It was full of quotations from books which the students had been asked to read, and other books too, one or two of them sources I wouldn't have expected a year 12 student to find. Yet find them she had. These quotations were linked neatly enough, but not to form an argument. We had by this time developed a way of choosing tasks for assessment so that students were forced to choose a position and then argue for it. Information, though obviously desirable, would not of itself get the student a pass. They had to take a position on their topic and argue their case. This the girl had not done. She had collected numerous quotations and observations, of partial relevance it was true, and had stitched them together. I showed the essay to one or two of my colleagues and they agreed with me that it should not pass. I handed it back.

The controversy began. I was rung by a teacher from the girl's previous school, telling me what a studious person she was. I told him why the essay had been ranked as it had. He came to the college to see me, telling me he'd taught several members of the girl's family, and her older sisters and brothers had all gone to Latrobe University and done well. He didn't change my mind. At this stage I took the precaution of telling the director of the college that a situation had arisen which might get as far as him. He was amused, I think, and told me he'd be ready.

A few days later I was called to the phone. It was the girl's uncle, telling me that she was honest, she'd never cheated in her life, she was a diligent student, she'd done well in the past and the whole family expected her to do as well as her brothers and sisters. They had all done well …

Something about the resonance of his voice told me he was in a room with other members of the family listening. He was acting – *acting* – as their spokesperson. He made it clear that unless I settled the matter swiftly he'd take things further. I might get into a lot of trouble. I told him that he should speak to the college director, and I'd transfer him straight away. I put the phone down to do what I'd said, but could hear his voice protesting, so I picked it up again. It wasn't necessary, he said, to put him straight to the director, surely we could sort the matter out …

A couple of days later one of the girl's sisters came in. She asked me to raise her sister's mark. Her sister was the last in the family and the whole family was determined that she should reach Latrobe. The others had done it and she *had* to do it too. I explained to the sister that there was something fabricated about the essay. It had been stitched together by someone who was clever enough to find passages of some relevance to the topic, but wasn't able to find a position of her own and mount an argument supporting it. The essay doesn't *say* anything, I explained, it only quotes other people saying things surrounding the topic but not bearing directly upon it. The sister admitted, after quite

a while, that that was what her sister had learned to do when she was out of her depth, which was most of the time. She had developed what were in their way quite remarkable skills for carrying out this deception. Doubly a deception because she had, perhaps, learned to deceive herself as well as her family. She had learned to use a library to find what she couldn't do for herself, and had fooled a good many people before finding herself in a situation she couldn't find a way through.

I walked to the car park with the older sister and felt that she at least would make an attempt to turn her family's thinking on the matter, though how successful she would be I had no idea. The girl who'd caused the storm left the college and once again I never saw her again, but when I got home that evening I sat by the fire and wept, thinking of the girl making a trap for herself. The family had gathered around her, supporting her, they thought, but destroying her in fact, as they backed the uncle who'd rung to tell me what had to be done. It may have worked somewhere in the world but it wouldn't work at our college where, by now, our procedures had stood many tests. She hadn't deserved a higher mark for her essay, stitched together from bits and pieces, but neither had she deserved to be torn apart by a family believing it was fighting for her, protecting her, and all the rest. Drama, theatrical storms, can be impressive in the theatre but, despite popular sayings, and even Shakespeare himself, large areas of human life are not responsive to impassioned acting, nor should they be.

**A**fter a few years of teaching tertiary orientation programs, we became curious to know how well our ex-students were getting on. Kevin Moore decided that we should do a survey. Names and addresses were drawn from college records, a questionnaire was drawn up, and people who'd studied with us were invited to comment on the usefulness or otherwise of the preparation they'd received.

Letters went out and responses came back in hundreds. Kevin, and I, and others, read the replies and were amazed at the warmth and

gratitude expressed. Many people told us that they'd been given their chance by the year they'd spent at the college, and a number of them made it clear they wouldn't have had the same opportunity anywhere else. This was gratifying, of course, but it was also a success, and that imposes a responsibility. I think we all tried quite a lot harder to tailor our programs – art, science, humanities, music, drama, business – more carefully to suit the transition from the world of secondary schools to the world of universities. We looked at our courses and the ways we delivered them. We tried to imagine the effects of our teaching on the minds of the students. Were we teaching the right things in the right way? Were the tertiary institutions our students went on to as careful of them as we were? We thought they probably weren't, but that was something we had to prepare our students for. In a sense, they were on their own when they left us, but sometimes they came back to us to tell us how things were.

Mary Alatas, another Greek girl, went to Latrobe. She told us, calling in one day, that she was having difficulty with a certain subject so she'd gone to see her tutor. He, to her amazement, told her that if she visited him at his home in Sandringham, he'd assist her. 'Sandringham,' Mary said, 'It's such a long way. Why couldn't he help me at Latrobe?' Those of us who knew her knew why. Mary had a quaint habit of taking you by the wrist and stroking your hand, or palm, when she was anxious. The tutor at Latrobe had taken this another way. We told Mary not to go to Sandringham, but to take any assistance she could get in the presence of another student. When people needed help there should be two of them!

And there was Chris Strover. He was in his early twenties when he came to us, unobtrusive, quiet, apparently unremarkable. He was enrolled in a subject that I taught. We had, by then, decided that when we gave students their essay topics we should give them also a criteria sheet, setting out the basis on which their work would be assessed. To pass, you must … To get a higher level … To get an A, you have to … This was not only a matter of fairness, it made marking easier. Except

in the case of Chris. Each time I read an essay he'd handed in, I'd feel myself slumping. He was so clever, but he hadn't done what the criteria sheet said he had to do. Surely he couldn't have failed?

Then I would read the essay a couple more times, and it would become apparent that he'd pitched his thinking beyond the requirement of our 'A' criteria to a point somewhere level with our own thinking in deciding to teach the topic. It was as if he was already far beyond preparing for tertiary study and wanted to take the matter further than it had been taken before. Chris achieved an A level in all five subjects, making him, as best I can recall, the only person ever to do so at our college. He went to Latrobe, stayed about a year and a half, then dropped out. He'd lost interest, and he became a postman in my suburb, Ivanhoe. I saw him occasionally in the street, and I see him still, quiet, courteous, apparently unremarkable, but …

Humans are such a varied lot, and, if granted autonomy, they can go in an infinity of directions. In helping students get to university we were engaged in what we thought was one of the finer forms of social engineering and our students' achievements in later years confirmed our estimation of what we were doing, but Chris was a reminder that the finest minds may decide not to go the way others suggest. Does that mean the path we offered was a cliché? Perhaps, perhaps not: is a cliché only something that's been done many times, or is it something undertaken without much commitment of thought? People may start on a path of action and then decide, for reasons good, bad or indifferent, that they want another path. I think I am at a crossroad between trying to create good, productive, socially useful systems of practice, and realising that systems don't always liberate: they can enslave, or en-cliché a person, however well-intentioned they were when offered.

**T**here were some problems we never solved. At the start of each year most teachers had an introductory unit, and when it drew to a close, they wanted to assess. Students were given an essay to write. The

trouble was that, having five subjects, they were likely to have five essays at once. We tried ways to rationalise this, but never got very far. Other problems found other solutions. Students worked, and learned, better if they were in a well-bonded group. Teachers had a variety of ways of achieving this. I thought Helen Fallaw's was the best. She got everybody to sit in pairs, interviewing each other, after which each student had to introduce his or her interviewee to the group. This involved a good deal of merriment and had the effect of getting the group ready to do things together. Work could start in the second session.

Work. As usual, applied science groups were different from art, drama from business, and so on. Science students liked clear explanations, formulae really, intelligent as they might be. They expected teachers to give them firm answers on which they could build their next step. The hesitations of the humanistic mind annoyed them. I learned to use this against them by making them read *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* of Thornton Wilder. Readers may know the book; it raises the question of why the bridge fell suddenly, pitching five souls into the river below. Was this God's intention, or not? An accident perhaps? If an accident, why did God allow it to happen? This was just the sort of formulation that science students liked; therefore they watched with interest as Wilder developed his investigation. The stated terms of this investigation, however, are a trap for the unwary mind. What happens as Wilder unveils his story is that each of the five who died is brought to a moment, just before the fall, when they recognise the faults they are carrying through the world, and resolve to begin again. This resolve, this miraculous resolution, is their achievement: it carries Wilder's message of love entering the world, both as a miracle in itself, and as the only bridge – *bridge* – mankind will ever have between acceptance of this world and passing to the next, should there be one.

I enjoyed trapping my science students in Wilder's deceptive dilemma, because it forced them to read very carefully in order to support whatever they wanted to suggest.

I became co-ordinator of these tertiary entry programs, and over the years I did this job from a variety of tiny rooms in one building or another. At one stage I used a little office leading off one of the science rooms where I'd taught *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*. A colleague of mine needed a room at one time to complete a project and I suggested she use my office. She did, and she came to me much amused. 'Does anyone know that you can hear every word of what's going on in the room beside you?' I said I had never mentioned this because I didn't listen. If I was in my office when a class was in action, I put my mind into my work and ignored the room beside me. Normally I couldn't tell you what had been said in the class. 'Well,' she told me, 'I was in the office when Mohindar came in for a class, and I couldn't get out.' I was amused; this had happened to me.

'What a performance!' she said. 'He started off telling them that he'd learned that some of them had gone complaining about him to someone – you probably, or Kevin,' she said. 'And he wanted to know who'd made the complaint and what they'd complained about.'

'Kevin, I would think,' said I. 'And?'

'And he lay on the floor and he said, I am waiting to be told what you have to say. And there was quiet, and then they just started talking among themselves, taking no notice of him, and he lay on the floor staring at the ceiling.'

'He does present a problem sometimes,' I said.

He wasn't our only problem. I was never sure when our director would spring something unexpected on us. There were days when I was sure that obliteration was the impending fate of my department. A number of my more doctrinaire colleagues were unpopular around the college and I knew not to expect much support if the administration moved against us. On the other hand, the director professed confidence in me and gave me the time and mobility to press the case for statewide management of the programs we were teaching. Getting to know this overall position was discouraging because so many people were trying so hard with so much commitment, while nobody was willing

or able to provide the systemic support without which we would always be under-funded, undirected amateurs trying to build a better system than the conventional one operating in government and private secondary schools. There was an overseeing committee for tertiary orientation programs, and our director was on it; he was a natural for any committee with influence, and he was concerned, I think about the effects if the programs he'd allowed to develop were suddenly to disappear. What would he do with the teachers? The rooms? Then he switched his attention elsewhere and sent me as his delegate, a position I quickly made my own. I was pleasantly surprised by the amount of goodwill our programs commanded, and dismayed at the lack of mechanisms for management. Could anybody do anything and call it one of our programs? The answer was, pretty well, yes. The paradox here was that teachers had for years railed against the influence on schools of universities (several by now), the most prominent among these criticisms being the devaluation of the students and areas of studies which weren't university-oriented, and here were we, one of the more successful breakaway groups, owing quite a deal of such success as we were achieving to the definition, the discipline, provided in our teaching by the fact that preparing our students for university was our goal.

If we had been given another goal, another task – the transition from primary to secondary, let us say, or the years of adolescence, the most difficult challenge of all – would we have done as well?

I am inclined to doubt it. Another part of my mind feels excitement at the challenge, and wishes it had been laid down for me, somewhere in the past …

It's twenty years since I left the world of education, and they've been good years, so that when I look back I have a mixture of feelings – any number of happy moments of interaction with students, and disappointment verging on misery when I think of the quality of systems as opposed to the quality of people struggling within the

systems to do something worthwhile. Systems and people: I will take them separately in the sections that follow.

1 Extracts from poems by Bruce Dawe are taken from *Condolences of the Season*, selected poems, F.W.Cheshire, Melbourne, 1971

2 'Because I could not stop for Death' is taken from *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, edited by Thomas H. Johnson, Faber & Faber, London, 1977

# Systems

**D**istinctions made by society in its management of education usually reveal the purposes and confusions innate in what it's doing. Most education systems are amalgamations of a variety of purposes, pushed together in haste and without consideration of complexities; these are left to people at the chalkface, as the saying has it, to sort out as best they can.

Take the conventional division between primary, secondary and tertiary education. Why do these three sectors of education separate as and where they do? I cannot tell you, but I suppose young people need to feel that there is an end to being in the stage they're in, at which point they'll graduate to something higher. But that's a division based on students' exhaustion and restlessness; can we not do better?

Perhaps: it's possible to think of primary education as a process of socialising the young during which they are introduced, successfully it's hoped, into the early stages of learning about language and mathematics, and possibly arts and crafts as well. The tertiary stage is where professionals gain qualifications for their livelihood, and generalist students are trained in the various disciplines – history, literature, economics et cetera – which society uses to understand itself.

The secondary stage? This is conventionally seen as the period where the young are re-socialised during and after adolescence, and taken through the transition from basic to advanced learning. The young person completing secondary education is presumed to have been satisfactorily socialised; that is, he or she can function as a citizen of the nation state, to use two terms held in high esteem at the beginning of the 1870s, when public education systems were legislated for in this country, but declining in the consumer age. This secondary stage can be seen, then, as repressive, in that the adolescent has to be trained or controlled, yet also developmental, in that if it is successful then the young will be in a good position to choose and then succeed

in tertiary studies. I think we can say that if the underlying needs of society and individuals are catered for then the lines of separation don't matter very much.

Except, of course, that schools are institutions in their own right, they have lives of their own, and these frequently take over from the educational purposes they purport to serve. I think the first requirement of an education system is, then, that it consider social needs and individual needs without much initial reference to the means – schools, excursions, qualifications, etc – whereby these needs are satisfied. This may seem a pedantic distinction, but in education as in most things little can be achieved unless prior steps have been completed. If I look into my recollections of Victorian education, I recall unqualified people pushed in front of classes with no better purpose than to keep them as busy as possible. In other words, nobody knew what they were supposed to do beyond the highly visible and much-dramatised fact of not losing the battle that was assumed to exist between society and its young; the young, of course, could smell the deficiency in the air of the classroom, and were always ready to fight the disciplinary war because if that was where the battle lines were drawn then they, the allegedly undisciplined, were likely to win. A shambles, a tumult, in the classroom meant that the system had lost the battle. The nation, the system, would conventionally blame the defeat on the inadequacy of the teacher – *not cut out for the job, unfortunately, we now realise* – and look for someone to take the failure's place.

So, my second point: a failed teacher is a failure of the system, and so is a failed student. Remember Neville Smith? Who failed? Neville? His parents? The teacher who didn't notice him writing on a bench? The principal who expelled him? The school? The timber workers of Bruthen? The State of Victoria? Someone else? Who?

Some or all of the above, I suppose, but it was Neville who got kicked out ...

Today, most of us would like to say he could make a second start, but a grain of salt should be added to this. Neville's circumstances almost

certainly precluded him from another crack at education. All his future learning would have taken place, I'm sure, outside the system. Once people realise that they've been removed from the system they learn how to function outside it; that is, they know that society's against them, so they have to use cunning to survive. Survival, not fulfilment, becomes their goal.

We need to realise this because once we create a system, and we must, we are also creating a space outside it where those condemned as unwanted must be able to make a life. I find myself curious about such a space, but first things first: what sort of system do we want to create?

Attempts to answer this question are common enough, but quality is rare. What does society want of its people? To speak in a rough and ready way, society rarely knows. It never gets to define the whole, although partisan voices are always calling to be heard on particulars. Our boys and girls should respect the monarch and the laws, they should be willing to fight and die for their country (!), they should respect motherhood (!!) and learn to drive cars safely. Oh, and they should learn to avoid pregnancy, or else to abstain from intercourse because if they don't they'll face condemnation, forced marriage to the father/mother of their child, and a long period of living with the shame of what they've done …

I think it's clear that society knows what it doesn't want much better than it can articulate what it wants. National ideals are hard to formulate, harder to express in ways that cause people to agree. Aspirations tend to sound pious and shallow, whereas condemnations of the unwanted are usually filled with fierce passion of some (unreliable) sort. Nobody forces societies to find the answers they should find; it's simpler to treat society's goals as a work in progress and resort to throwing out the misfits, as Neville Smith was thrown out of Bairnsdale Tech. Notice, though, that crucial difference between the government school and the private: in general, private schools can expel those they find unsatisfactory, and where do they go? To a

government school that can't refuse them. Power structures overlie everything, threading their way through the activities of schools as everywhere else. I referred in the previous essay to Rupert Terrill, Principal of my first school. He was a Rotarian. When he died, his replacement became a Rotary member too. Rupert Terrill was still in charge when a young maths teacher called Graeme Duff had trouble with a boy called Trevor Brodribb, whom he found insolent. He sent the boy to Terrill's office. What he expected the Principal to do I can only guess: frighten him, I suppose, or threaten him with dire punishment if he displeased his teacher again. Who knows? Rupert Terrill found the situation more disturbing than the teacher expected. Trevor Brodribb's father ran a local garage and was, like Terrill, a member of Rotary. Two members of Rotary! Rotarians positioned themselves at the town's highest level. Interactions taking place inside this organisation had ramifications far and wide. The Rotarian's son had been sent to the Rotarian Principal. Terrill spoke to the boy, then led him back to the classroom, a humble portable placed, delightfully, above the river, with a view of the green flats and blue mountains to the north. The Principal spoke to Mr Duff's class about the need to put their best efforts into learning mathematics, and to be polite with their teacher because he had things to offer that they would need in later life. He invited the young Brodribb to take his seat and be respectful thereafter. The boy sat. The Principal left. The young teacher had to resume, knowing that in the eyes of the class the Principal had backed the boy, not the teacher. The boy, because of his father. His father was a pillar of the town, the boy would surely follow him, the maths teacher might return to Melbourne at the end of the year. The town, thus, would look after itself, and the teacher? The system, it could be assumed, would look after him. He could always accept a present at the end of the year, thank the donors, and leave.

To be replaced, one would hope, by someone who knew where he stood in the town's estimation.

What does society want? Society is rarely unified, wanting only one thing. What does society want? It wants the appearances of success, and it will usually need guidance to know the difference between fools' gold and the real metal when it comes to hand. The teaching profession, then, will always – always – need to be shrewd, and sometimes a little deceptive in formulating for the surrounding society the goals to which, by some sort of formal agreement, they say they aspire.

This is cynical, you say? So, what did you expect? I've placed the teaching profession in a position that is both supportive of society's aims and critical of them. Teachers, especially those responsible for the arts and humanities, need to be, should be, haunted by their role of conscience to those they serve. I single out the arts and humanities because these are the areas of study where students form understandings of the society of which they are a part. This is hard. It's not possible to be part of a thing and also to see it from the outside, and yet we have to try to do this, all the time, if we are to be fair-minded, responsible people, if those who know us, who deal with us, are to know that we are well-made through and through, and good.

As we would like to be.

The arts and humanities are not alone in carrying this burden. Others must do it too. Teaching motor mechanics doesn't mean one must be an advocate of the car; teaching carpentry apprentices doesn't absolve anyone from caring for the country's forests. Even the simplest and most obvious forms of making people computer-literate are aiding society's transition towards having an electronic base rather than the earlier mechanical one. Few decisions are value-free, so the values inherent in what we're doing need always to be considered without – heaven spare us! – inviting control by the neo-Calvinists forever lurking. The balance in these things is largely sustained by the attention span of the students; they want to know how to do something and they expect to be told. If they want to write well, however, or paint, or make pottery, the teacher can give them a few simple rules,

then do little more than wait for them to develop. Certain things lend themselves more easily to instruction than others. Certain things can be taught by stipulating a few simple rules for everyone to obey. Other things can't be 'mastered', as if from outside, they simply can't be done well except by someone who's prepared to shape, or reshape, their lives to bring their personalities into accord with the task. Drawing is such a practice, and writing is another. Both are expressive, more so, perhaps, than most of us realise. A few deft strokes with the brush, the crayon or the pencil, and we have the goldfish, the flower, the distant range. Simple! But simplicity is an achievement of the person whose hand holds the brush, crayon or pencil. Simplicity in writing, purity of expression, is an achievement of the mind prior to the employment of words. But simplicity can't be taught, it must be innate in the environment, that is, it must be a quality surrounding the activity, every activity, of the place of learning. This, you will not fail to observe, is diabolically hard to achieve, when the students' days are divided into forty-minute learning periods, with a vast array of activities claiming their attention, with every teacher trying to impose his/her demands on students and fellow teachers alike, bells ringing, homework being dished out, corrected and handed back, with attendant flushes of triumph and despair according to the outcomes ... Schools are places of great complexity, and we must keep in mind the fact that learning is not only taking place along the lines, sometimes tangled, sometimes tender, between teacher and individual student, but also via the incredibly complex mesh of feelings and influences sparking intermittently, and sometimes with overwhelming force, between members of the learning group.

Politicians seeking to impose on an education system, or merely to check out how well it's working, normally think of testing. Bless them for their minds are simple. They institute, or want to institute, a test. National standards, they say, need to be defined and then maintained. If they find, as invariably they will, that certain students, schools, areas or ethnic groups are doing better or worse than others, they have then

to find ways of equalising: this may mean paying 'good' teachers (or principals) higher wages. They are thinking of their schools as if they were businesses, or army units, perhaps. They expect units of learning to be delivered as if by Australia Post. People without experience in education rarely see why the goals they prescribe can't easily be achieved, because they've set goals for themselves in their own lives and they've achieved them. What's wrong, they want to know, with our schools?

Is anything wrong with our schools?

Probably, but how would we know?

Success-oriented parents find this question easy; they look at the pass rates in the higher years, and they ask what percentage of the year 12 students are offered a tertiary place. Simple! But what if the school's population contains high numbers of recent arrivals from Africa, let us say, and the school is being asked to squeeze into the children's schooling all the learning and adaptation which will require two or three generations to take place? Situations of this sort require that the children's parents be given as much attention as the young people, but this is unlikely to occur because ...

Why? The answer I think is that the public still conceives of schools as performing the functions that they performed before large-scale migration changed the country, and the palpable success of many migrant groups allows the public to avoid the rethinking of public education which would appear to be necessary.

Why will such rethinking not take place? That's easy too. It won't happen because many people have built their lives and perhaps their working careers on the assumption that responsibility for children has been handed over to the education system for much of the day, most of the year. The education of society's young has become entangled with the economic liberation – or is it slavery? – of society's parents. Schools are required, not so much to teach children, as to 'keep them off the streets', as the saying has it. Society requires, though it rarely says as much, an education system that imprisons at the same time as

it liberates. If society finds it hard to function with kids under its feet then education, schools, teachers and the activities they control are the answer to the problem.

Yet schools are forever between the devil and the deep blue sea. They exist, they're costly to run, they have to justify themselves. They can't shake off the demands of parents to look after their children while they, the parents, go to work. If working hours are longer than school hours, as is normally the case, the school may need to have after-hours programs once regular classes have ended, lasting through until the parents pick up their children. There are also schools, some of them in aboriginal communities, which provide breakfast for their children because nobody can learn unless they've been fed. The necessity for such support is obvious but it is also a distraction from the questions of curriculum and delivery which should preoccupy our educational institutions. You may say that the two cannot be separated; that student welfare is prior to student learning; that questions of food and poverty, of how to deal with children whose parents are failing through drugs, illness or despair, are prior questions to those of classroom achievement, but they go together, and that's why it's so difficult to consider the business of learning separately from all the societal questions within which learning has to take place.

I think of Robert Roseburgh. His father worked for the railways, and Robert was the oldest of a number of children. The Roseburghs lived in a housing commission home, adequate but small. Crowded. Robert was good at English and I was fond of him. He wore short-sleeved shirts in summer, and in autumn. As winter closed in he wore no more than he had in summer. 'Aren't you cold, Robert?' 'I'm fine thank you sir.' One day I saw him in a jumper. 'You've got a jumper today Robert?' 'Mr Elsdon gave it to me sir.' Harry Elsdon was the sheetmetal teacher, in charge of lost property. He'd noticed that Robert needed a jumper, and he'd given him one. 'Poor kid was cold,' he told me. 'You could see the goosepimples on his arms. I couldn't let him go through winter like that.'

Harry had been a bikey as a young man, competing in hill climb events and the like. He was married now, with six daughters, wondering where his masculinity had gone. Six daughters! 'I never thought that'd happen to me,' he used to say. He was curious to find out how often his married colleagues 'did it' with their wives because he sensed – feared – that peaks of desire were behind him. He was easy to laugh at yet wonderful to watch when he was twisting, turning, flattening or curving metal, things he did with ease. Metal responded to his hands. And he knew that Robert Roseburgh needed a jumper, and he gave him one. It was a simple and lovely act that's stuck in my mind because it reminds me, reminds us all, that tenderness, love, consideration and compassion are a side to education that it can't do without. The state can't provide these qualities, only make opportunities for them to happen.

There are many things the state can't do, and not so many that it should prescribe. A state's education minister may reasonably, in my opinion, ask schools to give their students a consciousness of the nation's history, but would be wise to leave the questions of how this should be done and what sort of consciousness they develop, to the schools themselves. As an ex-teacher myself I find few things more exasperating than political leaders laying down things that citizens ought to know. They ought to know about Gallipoli, the US alliance, the run-scoring of Don Bradman. Why? The meaning of each of these prescriptions changes the moment it's put on a must-be-taught list. Anything that has to be taught changes from being whatever it was to a postulate of the people in power. This is not good! Citizenship itself is often regarded as a series of interlinked virtues which by their description and application render the 'citizen' almost abjectly obedient; one attribute of a successful citizen, in my view, is that s/he is sceptical of those postulates of people in power that I mentioned a moment ago. Citizens need government, and they need to be wary of government. To put it the other way around, government is necessary,

and it should never be trusted too far. The best governments do foolish things and the worst governments betray those who need them most.

So those whose trade is education live in an ambivalent relationship with the state. This ambivalence will almost certainly extend to the communities among which they work. A teacher is not only forever trying to raise the bar to get the students a little higher, s/he is also questioning the quality of the surrounding culture while at the same time trying to improve it. Where are we today? Where do we want to be tomorrow? Environmental science is a key discipline today, but then all science is environmental, is it not? Students want to be shown how to do things, but those who teach them must ensure that they consider the effects of what they do. Our aboriginal people, scorned for so long in what used to be their land, are teaching us by their presence that our European inheritance may not be the best fit for our ancient, eroded land. Wisdom, learning, may come from a variety of sources. The global, and the local – this is the key dichotomy of our times. The global shouldn't seek to overwhelm the local, but it will, so the local must fight back. This it will be able to do if it has knowledge of itself. This fits nicely with the processes of education, whereby young people are curious, first, about things around them, and then, having, as they think, understood them, they want to push their understanding further. The state may reasonably require, I think, any school or all to build their local curriculum on a basis laid down by the state whereby all paths lead to everywhere else: barriers should not be inbuilt. The state may reasonably require, also, all schools to publish and compare their curricular offerings; that is, to take part in an ongoing, practically endless discussion of the suitability of their decisions. Schools should be open to say that they won't attempt to do everything. A school in an area swamped by recent arrivals could reasonably define itself as having finished its job when the young people (and their families supporting them) have sufficient understanding of the ways of their new country to make them ready, now, to acquire the qualifications needed to make prosperous, fulfilling lives. An implication of a school

deciding to operate in this transitional way might be that it delays, for its students, by a number of years their arrival at the upper secondary, pre-tertiary level of education, or that it builds into its methods of teaching and learning some requirements whereby those who are succeeding are placed in a tutorly role in relation to those coming along behind them, or even newer arrivals in the country. Those who have learned a little must teach those who don't know yet.

Such a scheme might be applicable to any sort of school, and in a subtle way it probably exists everywhere and all over the place at the present time. The Old Boys and Old Girls associations of wealthy private schools, with their reunions and their giving schemes, make it that little bit easier for today's students to follow where others went before. Government schools have been slow to follow. One feels, looking at the schools of my state (Victoria), that they are too busy coping with the process they're responsible for to connect it with the earlier stages of their students' lives, and even more unwilling to follow up what happens after. It would seem to me to be a requirement of a democratic society that it should know what it is doing for and to its citizens, and should have the means to acquire this sort of knowledge.

Learning is endless, but education takes place in systems, and a system should have self-awareness built in at every stage. That, I think, *is* the responsibility of the state. Almost everything else might be left to teachers and the communities that support them, though even as I say this a warning appears in my mind: there were times in my Bairnsdale years when I was pleased to know that my ultimate judges were in the capital, not the town where I worked. I saw enough ignorance and prejudice in the twelve years I had in the loveliest of regions to know that sometimes beauty was hardly the ideal backing for someone teaching in a challenging way.

# People

You've already met Harry Elsdon, who crept into the previous section. If I cast my mind back to other teachers I've worked with, I remember Ray Feely's way of washing dishes. Yes, dishes. Ray would look at the staffroom sink, put in a plug and run some water, then, ever so deftly, he would wash what others had left and put things out to drain. A few minutes later he'd pick up a tea towel, economical in movement, a time-and-motion study in action. He was just as skilled when I visited him amid the rafters of the house he was building. He would perch, balancing on a beam, and explain why he and his fiancée had laid out the rooms below in the way they had. They were Catholics, and they lived simply; the faith defined a path through life's problems, and they were happy to follow it.

I wasn't, and it made life that much harder. Years passed, I moved to Ivanhoe, and I was driving through nearby Heidelberg one Saturday when I saw, to my considerable surprise, a coach, complete with shafts for the horse that would pull it, in the yard of a Catholic school. The coach took the form of a giant pumpkin, with curvaceous sides, painted grey, and pink inside when the door was open. It was for children to have rides during a fete to raise money for the school. What a splendid idea! I stopped, and recognised the man unloading Cinderella's carriage: Ray Feely! We talked for a minute, then we separated finally (I must assume), I to drive away, Ray to supervise the Cinderellas whose parents would pay for them to ride in his coach. He'd gone ahead with the life he'd been starting, all those years before.

Harry Elsdon, as I told you, felt he'd lost the best of himself by moving on from his youth. This causes me to think of Jim Blackmore. He taught Social Studies – a strange concept – with Kevin Murray and I, he lived on Raymond Island, then a scrappily developed outlier of the Paynesville fishing village, and he'd come to Gippsland from Adelaide where ...

He never told us why he'd moved. He liked to drink, though he carried it better than most, and he lived in semi-separation from the wife who shared the dwelling with him. Few of us visited the house. We only knew what Jim told us, and that was little enough. He was older than the rest of us, and he often picked us up on matters where we needed instruction. He made people define the words they used, and he knew their derivations. Debate became sharper when Jim was present, because there was less blurring of terms. 'Think!' he would snap at his students, and they were sufficiently in awe of him to do as he ordered. He told us proudly, one afternoon recess, how he'd made Jimmy Day tell him why, when two pages were held together by a pin, the point of the pin should lie between the pages, not allowed to poke out. 'Day told me,' Jim said, 'that the point shouldn't be able to prick your finger!' Jim smiled, pleased with his work. 'That wasn't bad for Jimmy Day!'

Jim did no preparation and had no long term plans, relying on his ability to catch his students wherever their minds happened to be. He lived, as I said, on Raymond Island and if I or someone else drove him home after an evening's drinking, it was to the spot where he beached his boat. 'I'll be fine,' he would say. 'You don't need to see me off.' But things changed when he drifted ashore one night somewhere along the banks of his island, and was found in his boat. He was taken to hospital, first in Bairnsdale and then in Melbourne. A suspicion ran through me that he might not be allowed back to teaching. I went to see the principal of the time, John Hennessy. I told him I'd been to see Jim in his Melbourne hospital, he'd had shock treatment, but I hadn't been able to discover who'd authorised it, or how often he'd had it. Hennessy was tactful but resolved not to have Jim back. 'I was getting strange reports of things he did to students on the Paynesville bus. Trying to stub his cigarette on the backs of their hands, that sort of thing.' Hennessy was sitting in the principal's chair and I could see that from his point of view, he was right, and that I was only ...

What was I? Loyal to a man who'd made me take language teaching seriously. Who'd used his questions to probe me, looking for weaknesses and strengths. I'm loyal still, though I've long since seen through this renegade from some failure, perhaps disgrace, in a distant city. He offered an example of care and precision with language, and it was something I needed. He offered rules, as did John Hennessy, the principal who didn't re-hire Jim when he came out of hospital, damaged by the shock treatment so that he could do no more than chatter about the weather when encountered in the street. Jim had run out of usefulness in the time I'd known him. I'd become senior to the man who'd been senior to me, he was in a hurry to get away, his concerns about usage had been handed on and he was only a shell of what he'd been.

And what was that? He told me about lecturing young officers in Adelaide who were going off to fight the Japanese. Jim had never been to Japan, had never studied the culture of that country – it took Hal Porter to do that for me – but poured out the clichés of the period in order to get the soldiers ready for war. He told me he'd stopped and asked the officer in charge if perhaps he needn't go on, but was told that while he still had things to say, he shouldn't stop. So Jim had continued with his venting of the bellicose hatred of the time, all of it second-hand. Jim was nothing but a mouthpiece, a voice for hire, but it took me a long time to realise this, and I think I might say that he taught me by example, even if it was an example to be rejected. Much of what he said was what I needed. The point of the pin, as Jimmy Day perceived, is best kept out of harm's way, most of the time at least.

There were always new boys coming through, a hundred or so every year. Sometimes, if a teacher grumbled about a boy, Pat Arundell, teacher of agricultural science, would say, 'What's his father like? Oh ... ' naming the man '... he's all right. Good man. The boy'll be all right. They all become like their fathers.'

Did they? Nobody had said that when I was at university, or not in any way that I'd understood. If boys became like their fathers, and girls

their mothers, then progress was an illusion; teaching was not about improvement, except perhaps at the margin, but about maintaining the continuities: not letting things slip. Pat Arundell and his wife were of Irish Catholic descent so they believed that truth had been brought to earth many centuries before, and to acknowledge it was mostly a matter of inheritance, whereas I, I began to realise, was a devotee of the European enlightenment, for whom truth, or any of humanity's higher states, had to be sought after. I listened to *The Magic Flute*, where the characters arrive at a moment of illumination in the rays of Egypt's sun god. Humanity, for me, was forever in a state of becoming, and those who lived within a settled system, as Catholics did, disconcerted me. How could they not be restless? How could they bear to live repetitively, within a sphere, however large, of status quo?

I disliked John Hennessy, but I had to work with him, and when he was replaced by Jock Tomlinson, I was surprised to find that the new principal thought that Kevin Murray and I had worked too long under authoritarians and had become like them ourselves. Jock had been an art teacher, and he said to me, 'You don't give the kids enough freedom. You control them all the time. Everything's got to be the way you want it, you don't let them learn by their mistakes.' This annoyed me as much as Hennessy's overbearing (as I thought it) discipline. Hennessy perceived that he'd been sent to tighten a place that had grown slack. Something of the hierarchical nature of his church pervaded the way he ran things. The church wasn't afraid to punish because it knew, or felt it did, that mankind, unchecked, would loosen restraints until its evil side emerged, yet again.

This view had its opponents, of course. Not long after Jock Tomlinson took over, a young Irish priest arrived to take the Catholics for RI (religious instruction) on Friday mornings. He was a pleasant fellow, and I greeted him one morning on the stairs with, 'Good morning Father.' He stopped, amazed, and asked, 'Be you Catholic?' I assured him I wasn't. This interchange was overheard by a woodwork teacher called Ian Mitchell, also a Christian, but of one of the lower, less

ritualistic versions of this varied religion. He asked me how on earth I could say 'Father' to a priest. I told him it was a courtesy; that I'd call an army officer Captain without any intention of wearing khaki myself. Ian wasn't convinced. He needed a line between himself and those of other faiths. Catholics couldn't be trusted because they thought authority resided in Rome. It didn't. God was the sole possessor of authority, and the individual aligned himself with God's will according to the dictates of his mind and heart. Thus the individual brought him/herself into touch with God. There was no need for any priesthood to intervene, as the Catholics insisted on doing.

I hadn't been to Rome at this stage, hadn't felt the power of Catholicism at its source, but when I did, years later, I spared a thought for Ian Mitchell, who told me once that he'd been happier as a builder than as a teacher. In the crowds swirling through Saint Peter's, I saw numerous priests and felt a Chaucerian suspicion of these red-faced men, some of them smelling of drink, cunning, aware of the separation their church created between followers and those who led, those whose belief was to be kept simple while complexities were restricted to those who had training to deal with them. I'd seen similar priests at the Collingwood football ground, and disliked them as much in Rome as I had in Australia. Why was Ian Mitchell happier as a builder? For much the same reason as I found my job as a teacher of language and society's ways harder than the job parcelled out to the trade teachers around me. They left the ethical, moral and what we now call environmental layers out of their teaching, for the most part: they simply showed young men how to do things in effective ways. To their credit, they liked craftsmanship, but they didn't aspire to any aesthetic heights. The boys they taught, and the public behind them that the teachers served, didn't demand it of them. They had life easy, I thought, as I struggled with my role as one who served as a provider of what was wanted, and at the same time offered the critique by which the students and the society of which they were a part might, over time, be bettered.

If I was to succeed in this, my restlessness must be turned into a virtue. I didn't know how to do this, and of course I did. I simply taught in the way that came naturally to me. I suspected that my mother, many years before, would have been much the same. I'd had six years at a boys school, four years at a male college, and here I was in Bairnsdale working in another male institution. Men like to make fortresses of themselves, to give themselves lasting foundations, whereas women see the endless nature of change, of realignments, the positives of living in a flux. Since society, and life itself, works both ways, a boys' school run almost entirely by men is forever teetering on the edge of imbalance. You have only to shift your angle of vision slightly and what has seemed sane, sound, sensible and simple looks crazy. Funny. Ridiculous. Something one needs to escape from ...

I took myself into the bush. Ken Wong had taken me to Eagle Point on that first morning, and shown me Gippsland spread around, its rivers pouring into the lakes at our feet. I had no idea, as I stood with him, that I was looking at, into, my next twelve years. Gippsland won my heart, and it took me over. Much as I loved it, I knew I would have to leave one day, or it would take my identity from me and I was determined not to lose that. I was saved from such an absorption by the arts, which were only shallowly rooted in the east of the state. Almost everything came from the capital. I recall only one exception. Hal Porter produced a Chinese play called *Lady Precious Stream* and I took a minor part. The play opened my eyes as few other things have done. The attention of the audience was kept focussed on the narrative, because stage props – swords, horses, thrones, cups of tea – were handed out by property men – Hal was the first of these – and taken back the moment they'd been used. A character needing to travel simply said as much, received a stick with some horsehair attached, and 'rode' a few prancing steps, then dismounted. The property men resumed the 'horse' and the traveller commented on the walls of the city he was approaching. Thus reality was created by words, and artifice did the rest. At the end of the evening the applause was loudest

for Hal. He'd directed, of course, as the audience knew, but he'd also been stealing every scene with his weary dishing out of things his actors needed: cups of wine and all the rest. He knew better than we did, for he was an experienced actor himself, how to attract attention while appearing not to. He knew also the way to Gippslanders' hearts, for he was one himself.

Hal was scornful of outsiders, especially those with university degrees, setting out to improve local minds. Much as I admired him, and learned from him, his presence articulated my situation: how content was I to be like the people I was among, and how much an instrument of change? I keep returning to this question, and every time I see more clearly the differences between the rural and the urban teaching situations I found myself in. The people of Gippsland had a region to belong to, an aureole of mountains, fires, wind, snow, and the everlasting trees. Everywhere bush, rivers, lakes, foothills, and the surging waters of Bass Strait, rising and falling night and day. In Paynesville, where I lived for a year, one could hear, on a still night, the ocean on the other side of Lake Victoria, pounding the coastal dunes. The boys from Lakes Entrance brought stories of boats, fish, trawling the waters by day and – Gippsland thought of itself as a men's place – drinking at night. Coming from a farming family myself, the landscape was for me a part of the people who lived in it, on it, or what you will. Returning to Melbourne, taking up another appointment in a different place, made me painfully aware of what I was losing and none too sure about what, if anything, I was getting in recompense for the change.

I found myself working alongside an Anglican clergyman called Michael Brown. He was living beside one Melbourne's oldest churches, in Brunswick, but he preferred to teach rather than manage a parish. He was driven, gifted, and had a determination to improve similar to my own. He was as appalled as I was by the narrow determination of Preston Technical School. For some reason I connect him in my mind with an occasion when the school was gathered in its huge hall – used

for indoor ball games much of the time – to hear about the Seeing Eye Dog scheme; the occasion ended with a blind woman being led by her dog around the perimeter of the gathering, a moving if quaint achievement: I refer to it because it was I think the first occasion when I'd seen the whole of the hard-headed, indeed ruthless, school touched. Michael Brown put it to his colleagues that we should have the whole of year 11 timetabled in the hall for two hours on Friday mornings, when we could have visiting speakers and other activities. He talked us into accepting this and drew up a list of people to be invited.

Amazingly, most of them came, and the joint sessions were a major step in the building of a new humanities. The speaker I remember best was from the State Library of Victoria and he brought with him a selection of the library's treasures, spread on trestle tables and held up as he described them. The students were, I think, as intrigued as I was, and humbled by the embodiments of the state's history that he'd brought with him. They came up to talk to him when he'd finished. I noticed him snatching a look at his watch, then beginning to gather his books as he answered the young people's questions. He'd missed something, I noticed, and retrieved it. It was a page from a notebook, covered in pencil writing, the flowing hand of William John Wills. The Burke and Wills expedition: what a madness! There were the words of the young Englishman in the last days of his life. I looked at it, lying on my palm. At the time I speak of I don't think urban people were sufficiently respectful of aboriginal Australia to perceive the full stupidity of the 1861 expedition; it was seen as tragic rather than misguided, but either way, a relic of its passage lay on my hand. I took it to our lecturer, and he left shortly after. I told Michael Brown about the visitor's lapse, and I noticed his assumption – he was a clergyman after all – that I or any other teacher would return the relic rather than pocket it for sale to some avid collector. Michael, I thought, was no more at home in Preston than I was.

Am I doing Preston an injustice? Perhaps I am. I felt dismay when I saw my situation in Bairnsdale and twelve years later I was

dismayed by the challenges of Preston, and for much the same reason: I'd inherited nothing. There was nothing there. Nobody had any guidance for me. There was nothing written down, no records of earlier experience, earlier undertakings. The boys thundered up the stairs, full of energy, noise and, some of them, ambition, and what were they to be given? I felt, almost every day, that the school was a cage for locking up the young. Today, safely retired, if I'm surrounded by people wearing school uniforms in, let us say, Lygon Street Carlton, filling in questionnaires or conducting surveys, I feel sympathy for the teachers who've let them out of the lock-up, useless as the questionnaires may be. There's a famous Shavian aphorism: 'Those who can, do; those who can't, teach.' My friend Kevin Murray used to add, 'Those who can't teach, teach teachers.' Why have schools at all? Answer, the management of young people's learning needs focus, needs to be conducted in places where it can be known, almost guaranteed, to happen. Distractions need to be kept out. This is one point of view. Another has it that life itself is learning, and that to shut people away from what they want to know about is counter-productive.

And it makes young people bored. Frustrated because feeling cheated. Resentful because they're aware of what's being kept from them. Parents want their children to learn safely, to be sheltered from undesirable influences. The children want to find out for themselves. Schools are institutions – horrible word! – set up to balance the two. Schools want to be safe, to make it possible for the young to learn while the world's locked out. Teachers have to be prepared to live their working hours inside these institutions and too often they let the imprint of the institutions show on and inside their personalities.

Personalities fail. I recall a teacher I shall call Bert. An alcoholic. He turned up each morning more or less sober, but by morning recess was showing signs. He went up the street for a counter lunch and was running on habit all afternoon, topping up his alcohol level by sipping from nobody knew where. Other teachers, amused at his condition, speculated on where he kept 'it'. They searched, but couldn't find

his supply. He was sacked after some misdemeanor but the secret of his hiding place went with him. It troubled me that this sort of thing could happen in a government school. Couldn't we lift our demands on those who taught to some higher level than this?

Apparently we couldn't. The wrong people got promotions. I thought again and again of Brian Hone: 'Government schools need a hundred good headmasters'. He thought, as did the system that produced him, that to get quality you had to put quality in charge. I wanted a tradition that expected so much that it wouldn't have the patience to put up with Bert and his drinking for so long. Melbourne Grammar had had very little patience with failure and it had shaped me. I looked with scorn on Preston Technical School and on my own efforts inside it. What was being achieved? The walls of the upper passage were lined with those team photos, and, I had to admit, the same trick had been pulled, year after year, at the bluestone pile where I'd made my passage towards maturity. Teams, teams, teams ... Teams weren't hard to put together, but what about minds? What about traditions of learning and behaviour? What about those nuances and refinements of a superior way of life? It took fine people to make fine people, even if exposure to crudities had their uses too. Something about Preston, the suburb, the mentality, the school I was working in, demeaned its people, making it hard for them to rise to the levels they sometimes aspired to.

In later years, the TOP years I've referred to, I had the group with which I shared that hour with Emily Dickinson; in another subject I was teaching a similar group about Australia's electoral system. I had maps of each state showing the boundaries of electorates. I'd read up on voting systems. I spread these maps on the table and invited my students to analyse the workings of our parliamentary system from the ground up, as it were. The keenest, and sharpest, mind in my group was Domenica's, a beautiful young woman from an Italian family. She sensed where I was going to take a discussion and got there before me. I began to wonder how far her mind would take her. In the same group

was a young man I wanted to call Ray; he called himself Raymond. He was slim, good-looking and – fateful attribute – *knew it*. One Monday morning, Domenica was absent. I took little notice. Then I didn't see her for three weeks, and when she returned, she was different, or should I say indifferent. Something had happened. Raymond began to stay away too. We were fairly casual about people dropping out at that time: an urgency about attendance came later. From a few inquiries and remarks I heard the students making to each other I learned that there had been a party at Raymond's house when his parents were away, that Domenica had been there, that she'd slept with Raymond and, oh dear oh dear, had fallen in love. 'Fallen' is a strange word to be attached to love as if it is its natural clothing; 'fell pregnant' is even worse. Domenica wanted the love she felt for Ray(mond) to be a source for their two lives, or so I interpreted things, and he was no more than preening himself for having a beautiful woman under his influence. Domenica didn't finish the year; I no longer remember whether Ray(mond) did or not. I finished my teaching of the electoral system and went on to something else. I've already said of a number of my students 'I never saw him/her again' and that, I'm sorry to say, has to be said of Domenica too.

Years passed, as they have a way of doing, and a young woman called Nadine was in one of my classes. She was a year or two older than the other students, took up ideas easily, and used them fluently; it was a pleasure to have her sitting at the other end of the tables, an influence on her fellow students almost as strong as my own. Everything she did was handed in on time, easily and almost unnaturally well: I remember, though, a morning when she wasn't in her place. I started the class, and perhaps ten minutes after we'd begun, Nadine came into the room, carrying her things, saying, 'Sorry I'm late.' I looked up and saw tears in her eyes. It was a long time before she joined the discussion, but when she did, she was as clear as ever. For the time being, at least, she'd overcome whatever had happened to distress her.

Nadine went to Latrobe University. A couple of years later, I was sitting in my office of the time, directly above the humanities office in the former trade sector, when Joy Drever, humanities secretary, rang to say that a visitor was coming up to see me. 'I won't tell you who it is,' Joy said, teasing. In walked Nadine, beautiful as ever, and radiantly confident. She needed a brief note certifying something or other for somebody at Latrobe. I did this for her; she told me about the courses she was studying, and the ones she'd completed, then we went down to give Joy the letter I'd written, and then, as happens all too often in these pages, and in a teacher's life, Nadine left. Joy was the wife of a banker, and she'd learned from watching her husband's work and the people it involved, that people build on their hopes and that there are as many failures as successes. Preparing the letter for Nadine, and then sending it to her, would only take a moment, but I felt that the job was as special for Joy as it was for me. I sensed that Joy knew how much success meant to Nadine, and also that our former student wanted me to know how well she was doing: it was a mark of respect, and of something else very special – not love, but openness – which she felt for me and knew was available for her.

Tom Reid. I realise, in mentioning his name, that the students who've mattered most to me have all had an intuitive realisation of what they were supposed to be receiving; in a sense, they knew what was coming before it was given. Tom was such a student. When he handed in written work one had only to glance to know that he'd grasped all he'd been supposed to grasp, and he'd perceived, also, where these ideas led. Teaching is easy with students of this sort. It gives a teacher confidence to know that for someone else in the room it's easy too. The mind of the teacher stretches, gainfully, in hopes of being able to do a little more. Oddly, the presence of those who grasp ideas quickly helps the teacher to be patient with those who are slower, or even backward. One is good-humoured because one knows that there is already success in the room, and someone else, the quick and able student, who is being patient. If learning comes easily,

it's flattering to both student and teacher, and it's helpful. It seems to stimulate the creation of patience with those who are finding it harder. The whole thing, if it's easy for some, becomes an amusing game, and one feels, as a player who already knows that s/he's successful, that a good outcome can be achieved eventually, one way or another, and it will be easier if we all have a laugh at the difficulties – even those who are stumbling over them.

Tom did well with us, and left. Latrobe again, as I recall. I saw him at a party one night, in the flat of some very young teachers, not in my department I'm relieved to say, where there were a number of ex-students present. It was all a little too close for comfort, and I left early, but not before I saw Tom sitting on the stairs outside a bedroom with closed door, pulling on his shoes. I felt that his pants hadn't been on very long, after being off. Then I was distracted by a colleague who told me that the man she'd loved had been married that day to someone else. I held her for a while, then slipped away. Weeks passed, then the grapevine told me that Tom had become a convert to the pseudo-science/religion of scientology which was festering in our city at the time. I was appalled. That clear, responsive mind ...

I never saw Tom again.

How many times can I say this? As a teacher I felt responsible for my students, profoundly so for those I admired most. Insofar as they'd committed to study, they'd put themselves in my care: I wonder if I drew the lines of my responsibility a little too far out? I sense that the ethos of Preston would have told me to let go sooner: not to bother myself too much. But then again, I was on the side of those who were most capable of travelling far. Knowledge, or the knowledge of how to use knowledge, was the passport to travelling, and it wasn't equally distributed. Some only wanted a meal ticket, or the way to get one, while others wanted ...

... the whole wide world, as did I, for myself, and for them. Slowly we gathered, we put together, a powerful department. Against the odds, and within the too-great fluidity of the government system, we

opened up a place where a variety of people could make the contribution they had it in them to give. I've already mentioned the confusion in Victoria's education system, something which was eventually sorted out (to some degree) when the state government commissioned Jean Blackburn to recommend how upper secondary education should be reorganised. A new Victorian Certificate of Education was created and the various homegrown alternatives, including our programs, were swept away. I retired, most of my colleagues found new paths for themselves, and chaos had been replaced with a degree of order.

Yet it was out of chaos that we had made what we'd made, and no one person can claim the credit. Geoff Rogerson was brought in from outside as head of department, and he showed us what timetabling and good budgeting could achieve. Suddenly we took these things for granted. When Geoff was promoted, Kevin Moore took over, and lifted organization onto a new level. Good organization freed us to do what we wanted to do: teach, and guide the learning of others. We were teaching the subject matter of our courses, but also the methods of learning, and the attitudes which filtered the world so that understandings added to the lives of those in our program. Kevin surveyed our ex-students, and we saw that we were succeeding; achievement underpinned our sense of purpose. We began to look at our methods, the timing of things, ways of learning from each other and ways of linking assessment of our students to our own assessment of ourselves. We had more meetings than I care to remember, we passed motions, we didn't, we argued, we thought each other's ideas nonsense, or barely feasible, or halfway passable, and so on. Moving around the rest of the college as program coordinator, I was aware that humanities was vulnerably different. In later years I took over from Kevin the job of gathering statistics about tertiary offers made to and accepted by our students, and I made it my business to circulate these analyses among the heads of departments, including the various trades, plumbing, piano-tuning and the rest, but I couldn't fail to notice that our director never required other programs to assess themselves

in the same way. Were we then so challenging, over-weening perhaps, that the standards we imposed on ourselves couldn't be imposed on others? Or was it that the director guessed that the Victorian government would, one of these days, sort out the tangles of upper secondary education with a new system, sweeping the old ones out of the way?

If he thought the latter, he was right. We had about a decade of running a well-organised, valuable set of programs that were an addition to our region before we disappeared into another system and the features of what we'd built were forgotten. There's little relevance in describing a system that's vanished, so I'll concentrate on those who made it work – for a while.

I start with Brian Simpson. When he first joined us, he told me he disliked his father; he was searching for another path. He and his wife shopped on Saturdays in fashionable Lygon Street. They persuaded my wife and I to join them, so an Italian taste in coffee, prosciutto and cheeses informed our households for a time. Years passed, and Brian put his early teaching experiments behind him; he offered ethics as a tertiary orientation subject. It was never popular, but it achieved a group every year, and I was pleased by this because it offered an alternative to the fiercely Marxist morality of some of our other offerings, notably sociology and social theory. Brian also taught cinema and film studies, which took his students into the heartland of America's self-created propaganda but Brian, as far as I know, didn't use American film in a negative way; he pushed his students to find the aesthetic principles of any film that worked well, and thus to discover film as a new language. Brian's wife took a new partner, Brian moved to Kyneton, he played cricket with the local team, became its captain, then took a week's leave so he could play Country Week with his side. Walking back from the bank one morning, I decided to stroll through the Preston cricket ground and, to my surprise, I saw Brian padded up, bat beside him, next man in. I'm sure I would have asked, the following week, about the result of the game, but I don't remember now. What

I did realise was that no matter how intensely we, as a teaching department, discussed our purposes and methods, and insisted that agreements be carried out, each of us had aspects of our identity which weren't subject to the fiat of departmental meetings. Brian sat quietly, perhaps scornfully, through meetings where proposals were made for regulating this and that. Speakers in departmental meetings all too often adopted, perhaps unknown to themselves, a high moral tone. I thought this dangerous. I wasn't convinced that people knew what they were doing, and if they didn't, then they couldn't keep themselves under control. They also appeared to think that they could advise, or defy, the rest of the college. My contacts showed me this was fraught with danger. I remember a controversy at the end of one year when Philip Cassell, who taught sociology and social theory, said we should analyse the marks given in each subject in order to see that we didn't have some teachers handing out A, B or C marks more generously than others. Marks given in ethics, he asserted, were higher than marks in other subjects: could they be justified? Brian said little beyond the obvious; the numbers being compared were too small to have any statistical significance. Behind his words, and his silences, lay an unwillingness to have anybody push any further into his teaching than they'd already done with the various requirements we'd laid down. I was myself divided over this matter of regulation. Tertiary orientation programs were offered in eleven regions of the state and they were commonly criticised on the basis that teachers could do whatever they liked, give any marks they liked, and expect to have their students taken seriously!

This criticism was just. I wanted Preston to use its programs to produce students who were not only talented but credible: this meant that our procedures must be able to stand up to examination. Hence the critique of our students' results; hence the opportunity for teachers to be suspicious of other teacher's results ...

The matter died a natural death, but not until suspicion and discomfort had circulated once again in a department that was fairly

good at producing them. Problems will always arise in an activity managed by a varied group of people, but how are they to be solved? The first approach, one which is instinctive for many people, is to control via rules and regulations; the alternative is to develop a shared understanding and take it for granted that a variety of people will put the understanding into practice in a variety of ways. Brian Simpson was an example of the second approach, Philip Cassell of the first: I was in the weakest of positions, that of trying to have a bit of both ways, as and when appropriate, of course!

Perhaps the teacher I most admired was Tricia Caswell, and that ranking in my mind came about, I must suppose, because her outlook was as different from my own as it was possible to be. She was a woman. She was fiery, and I'd spent years getting my impatience under control. She saw, she heard, lies and bullshit while I saw people struggling to make a capitalist society work. She taught drama, and she made it, everywhere. Contempt flowed from her when people were what she called weak; that is, they weren't ready to make radical moves. She and Philip Cassell, her partner at the time, saw our department as a cell, whereas I hoped it would be an influence: these two ways of looking at the same thing show how far apart, as working personalities, we were. Tricia staged a performance with her drama students, improvised, she said. It ended with a drum beating loudly and a group of students, improvising of course, chanting, 'We want a revolution *now*!' It was what she wanted. She was active in the union, and scornful of people whose adaptation to society was restricted to obedience. The moment an idea, an objection, blocked her path, she wanted it torn down. It wasn't a matter of simple, perhaps courteous disagreement, it was clear analysis confronting false consciousness, which surrounded everybody, everywhere, all the time. Life was struggle, and people were brought down, made to abase themselves, unless they fought the unavoidable fight, which was going on, all around, all the time.

Philip got sick. Tricia stayed home to nurse him. His weakness, I sensed, was connected to her strength. Her nursing was an atonement for some victory she'd achieved at his expense. She moved on to other partners, vulnerable, I thought, through being open to them. One young man came down from Sydney to be with her; he told her, she told me, that he thought he might stay three months. Telling me this, she was aghast, and yet ambivalent; something in her wanted to be wanted as long as that, another part of her knew she'd be sick of him after a few more days, and he'd have to be sent back where he came from, so she could get on with recreating the world.

The world, the world ... in our various ways, all of us were showing our views of the world to our students, and they were going on to university, and enough of them were succeeding to make us think we were a useful current in a region, the northern parts of Melbourne, where there wasn't much for students unless they came from families wealthy enough to send them to private schools in Ivanhoe/Eaglemont, or Essendon/Pascoe Vale, two strips of high land which recreated, in ways comparable with the high-hill suburbs south of the Yarra, the class differences of nineteenth century Melbourne. Our students were Greek, Italian, Jugoslav, Macedonian, and the offspring of older, inter-war Aussie families. Asians were only just beginning to arrive when the humanities department's time was up. Africans came later again. Nonetheless, Preston was a melting pot and we had decided to create a new, educational ladder up and out: not so much out of the area as out, we liked to believe, of ignorance, of ideological imprisonment. Hence the unlikely coming together of Marxist, left-wing radicals and those whose radicalism took other characteristics entirely.

I myself was representative of this second group. I was teaching because it was my nature to do so, and the attitudes I brought to teaching were the ones I'd learned from my parents, from my years at Melbourne Grammar, and four years at the University of Melbourne as a resident of Trinity College. I'll deal with these four years in a later

section but there will be moments when I'll need to draw on them now.

My years on a New South Wales farm gave me the earthiness, the shrewdness, of Father, and the aspirations, the high principles of Mother. I had a base that I would never doubt. Already I feel a difference from Tricia Caswell, who wanted to wrench the world away from the direction she'd experienced. She wanted it to be different; I wanted to make everyone as confident of themselves as I'd been made. I knew very well what she meant by 'false consciousness', except that for me the false was often better than ...

What is the opposite of false? True? Workable? Good enough to get by? The better, shrewder, thing to do? A way of doing things that doesn't put you in disharmony with those around you? Tricia thought that false consciousness had to be confronted. Made to admit the errors in its ways. I thought differently. For me, there was nothing devastating about being surrounded by nothingness or wreckage. There was nothing new about it at all. That was how I'd started at Bairnsdale and again in my first days at Preston. You simply started, I thought, and you kept improving. I had a slogan, voiced often enough: fight only the battles you can win; occupy other ground surreptitiously. I might have added that as you occupied ground you looked around for further spaces to take over. I don't think I ever expected to be in a position where higher authorities understood the nature of my goals; this meant that what I wanted would never be handed to me on a plate.

What did I want? What I, to some extent at least, had had myself, a feeling inside me that I was inferior to none and equal to all. My parents had sacrificed to give me the best opportunity available and I thought the same openings should be there for everybody. Slogans like these are easy enough to say, but places of education test rhetoric severely. Pious utterances rarely fool those who have to listen. If you want to give people chances you have to create the structures that will change the students so they become the sort of people whose

success can't be stopped. Or so you hope. 'Change the students': in this respect I was the same as Tricia and those whose radicalism took different forms from mine. The students had to be changed, they had to undergo experiences and deal with challenges so that they were different people by the end of their year with us. This meant that I and my colleagues had to accept that when the students failed their teachers had failed, and this meant that when we devised the questions, the essay topics, by which the students would stand or fall, we had to accept that we were testing ourselves as teachers at the same time. If the students were to be challenged then so too were we. I think that reaching this point in my – *our* - collective thinking was probably the high point of my years at Preston TAFE. It was very different from the sort of teaching, usually quite skilled, at Melbourne Grammar, where well-worn men taught well-worn subjects in a good-humoured, sceptical sort of way, sure of themselves because they'd done it so many times before.

I don't know how long we could have gone on in the Preston humanities way. We would certainly have had to reinvent ourselves regularly, but the state government, in rationalising upper secondary education and creating a new, two-year certificate, dissolved the problem. TAFE stopped trying to succeed where secondary education had failed, and moved its focus elsewhere. People retired, as I did, or moved for the later stages of their careers. Something good had vanished. Ex-students could say nice things when they met us, we could reminisce occasionally, but our moment in the spotlight was over. For my part, I spent the last two years of my career in education as a TAFE representative in the processes that created the new certificate, and what I saw of the secondary system in those two years made me aware of what a privileged, because dedicated, span I'd had in my later years at Preston. I'd been appalled by the place when I'd arrived there, I'd been through a turbulent, often chaotic period of systemic change as technical education gave way to TAFE, but, with many colleagues,

too many to acknowledge here, I'd taken part in making something good ... only to see it disappear.

The processes of history, you may say.

# Boys, all boys …

Males at their worst are pack animals, females, at their worst, belong in herds. Wolves and dogs are the pack animals par excellence, noted for their ferocity, while herd animals – sheep, cattle, and so on – are more familial in nature, clustering together, as if conformity offers security when in doubt. Aggression, and the making of, or at least seeking, security are the distinguishing characteristics of pack and herd animals. Does this sound familiar?

I had ten years as a student in all-male surroundings, and longer than that as a young teacher in boys' schools. This was far more than was good for me. Males fall too easily into hierarchical behavior – authority systems, with an emphasis on power. Restless, ambitious young males want to test their positions in the hierarchy – the pack – and they cause trouble when they do. Perhaps the worst feature of this way of shaping the world is that it is in contradiction with the ideal atmosphere for learning, that is, when there is a settled, secure environment and an encouragement for the testing of ideas. Curious young people don't want to be looking over their shoulders when they're experimenting, even if it might be better if they did. Females, by contrast, are more skilled in negotiating, in developing and tracking interactions, less inclined to fortify their positions. They are the natural guerrillas, as opposed to the established forces, with sharply defined powers of rank, which come naturally to men. Women want, and are inclined to create, harmony, while men's version of this – how revealing this is! – is *order*.

Should we, then, educate our females with our males, or separately? The question has been dealt with endlessly, in one way or another, and this will continue, I have no doubt. It would seem, from my opening remarks, that I fall naturally into the co-education camp, but that's too simple a position. I prefer to look into the matter before committing myself.

It's quite possible to conceive of a co-ed school being run on male lines, while presumably, even though it's hard to imagine, a school's students might be a mixture of male and female while its curriculum and administrative methods might be feminine. Conversely, women teachers can be as authoritarian as men. Simply saying yes or no to co-education is taking the easy way out of an inter-connected set of questions. What are these questions, and, if it comes to that, what do we want to achieve when we examine the balance, the interaction, between male and female learnings in any system we set up? There is a classic, and unsatisfactory, reason for wanting to create co-ed situations, and a classic, and understandable, reason why girls' schools back away from mergers. Put simply, it goes like this: the boys need the presence of girls to civilise them and prevent them behaving, and thinking, in the pack-like way described above, while the girls and their teachers usually reply that they're better off on their own. If the boys' school and the girls' school merge to satisfy a need of the boys, then women have lost to men all over again. They've given up their opportunity for independent learning in order to reduce the damage that boys, left on their own, will inflict on themselves. Can we do better than this? Surely, but how?

We will have to begin with an agreed consensus on the state of male-female relations in the larger society, and then decide how far the school we wish to create will conform to society's norm, how and where it will stand apart, and how it will protect itself against inevitable criticism. Preparing for its next step, it will have to define its curriculum as carefully as possible: this is a debate which I would expect to take some years. Then the thinking of this new school will have to swing ninety degrees so that the second line of thought runs across the first. This will be necessary to find the best – I almost said the *correct* – way of teaching the curriculum. Something taught cannot be separated from the way it is taught.

I remember being involved, many years ago, in the training of teachers of humanities. After an up-and-down year, staff gathered

to plan our approach for the following year. The six or seven of us were agreed that the teachers we were training were thrown into such varied, and chaotic situations that what we needed to teach them was how to improvise on the run. They must be able to make something out of virtually nothing. (You will not fail to notice, dear reader, that that had been my situation at least twice before, but the view wasn't mine alone. Almost everybody who taught humanities in those days would have agreed.) We discussed what we might do to help young teachers through the difficulties we'd faced, and it occurred to me that our little group was putting itself in the paradoxical situation that we were proposing to use our situation of authority to impose on the trainees a way of recognising chaos and improvising within it in order to keep the flames of learning alive! Our method was at variance with what we wished to teach them. The group recognised the difficulty, and we stopped for the day. Something came up the next day and we postponed the discussion. Then something else arose and we never got back to the problem, crucial in education – that the means whereby something is taught is as important, as influential, as what is allegedly being taught. I say 'allegedly' because it's quite possible that the (probably authoritarian) means is what the teacher/institution regards as more important than the particular subject matter. I think back to my own days as a student at Melbourne Grammar ...

Classes lasted forty minutes. A bell rang, and there was a five minute break, during which time we moved to another room. When the second master came in, we stood. He told us to sit, he took control for forty minutes, and then we moved again, urgently because we dared not be late, but under tight control. The school moved with remarkable efficiency. It might be said that this strict control of itself in motion was one of the things it was most determined to teach. In later years, when I was myself a teacher, in places inferior to Melbourne Grammar because they lacked the older school's sophistication, I never saw this control replicated. You may remember earlier remarks about boys entering class to the beating of a drum. It was an obnoxious

attempt to impose something which wasn't already in the boys' minds. It was as empty an attempt at control as putting boys who weren't ready for uniforms inside a blazer and under a cap. The school was trying to impose the *thing* when the reasons why people wanted the thing didn't exist.

This is no diversion. What society really wants, what teachers, individually and as groups, really want will find their ways into schools regardless of attempts to keep them out. Schools can, I think, be a little purer, a little more ideologically correct, than their surrounding societies, but not for long, and not in detail. The devils and demons that were intended to be banished will find a way back unless the teaching institution is sophisticated enough to find ways of keeping them out. That means replacing them, and that means making sure that at every stage the delivery of curriculum matches the intentions of those who devised the curriculum in the first place. To give a simple and obvious example, there is something rather amusing in the idea of an authoritarian teacher teaching the principles and practices of democracy, is there not? Schools can hardly say that they are creating autonomous young people when students reach their rooms via the beating of a drum!

Why should the students march? Catholic principal John Hennessy would have said that it made the boys realise that they were part of something larger than themselves and marching would teach them to absorb themselves in the body of which they were a part. Ex-art teacher principal Jock Tomlinson would have said that boys didn't need to *march*, they needed to learn how to manage their interests and enthusiasms and turn them into activities with good, practical *outcomes*. What would I have said? I would have said, as I'm saying now, that students need to gain not only skills, but a high estimation of their own value. If you can make students believe in themselves as people with no superiors, then they can strive for almost anything with some chance of getting there. It's an attitude which, I believe, provides

the basis for real equality, whether between classes, sexes, ethnicities, nations, or what you will.

The applicability of this? It seems to me that if you want a truly co-educational situation you will have to work hard to develop the curricular subject matter, and then the resources and methods of teaching which will at least put it in reach of being achievable, and that this will extend into every aspect of the way the institution is created, and made to work. I have grown used to hearing organizations describe themselves with proud assertions such as 'An Equal Opportunity Employer': that is the sort of rhetorical-level-only approach which education must avoid.

Men and women, boys and girls, are different. All the time, or only in certain matters and at certain periods of their lives? These are difficult questions to answer. It's easy to define things so that the balance comes down in favour of, or against, segregating the sexes, or conversely, putting them together. If they are put together and well managed, they will surely learn to respect each other? Or does putting them together simply increase the opportunities for harm? I am reminded of a boy called David Andrews, a champion swimmer who spent hours at the Lakes Entrance Lifesaving Club. Late in year 10, his parents removed him from school. Why?

A whisper ran around the town. He'd got a girl pregnant during one of the Saturday night dances at the clubhouse, and his parents had decided he must marry her. Yes, marry. I looked at his empty seat in amazement. When he hadn't even finished year 10?

Then I ran into him at the newsagent's. He was glancing at a shelf of Penguin books, looking for something to read. I had the Melbourne Age under my arm. I would read it later in the day, to keep myself up to date. He noticed me. I greeted him. 'Good morning, David. How are things with you?' He said he was well, he called me sir, our conversation was ridiculous because neither of us was willing to open up the realities of his situation within earshot of the staff behind the counter. Anything said on Main Street would be around the town

in half a day. How was David? He wouldn't be able to tell me for twenty years, or thirty, would he? How was David? How was I? I was a servant of the society that surrounded us, and he was, I thought, a victim, yet, when I met his father, weeks later, and listened to him saying that David had made a mistake but now he had to turn it into a way of achieving integrity, and success, I had a mixture of reactions: I thought the man was stupid, I could see that he wasn't telling me his ideas for any other reason than that he wanted to be understood, I felt a pang of sympathy and support for David and his soon to be wife, or was it now-wife, and, most strongly of all, I realised that nothing I did or said would have the slightest effect. Mr and Mrs Andrews had taken their son from the school where I'd taught him. This was a drama of two families and nobody was consulting me.

Teachers, then, should not be too dogmatic about co-education, because it's a matter, fraught by fears, where teachers' intentions won't necessarily be listened to. Other people see the matter through the prism of their hopes and fears for their children. Parents' notions of respectability can be upset ever so easily by the misdeeds – misfortunes? – of their sons and daughters. Parents have accepted that they are responsible for more than themselves; they stand in a line joining past generations to the future, and any falling down, any failure, will be attributed to them if there's a breakdown in that succession. Handing on belongs to the parents, parents think, and it can be shared in part with teachers and schools, but parents are inclined to suspect that teachers are less concerned with moral transfer, than they, the parents, would like. Teachers may well argue, on general lines, that mixed classes of boys and girls are better for everybody than segregated groups, but once there's a scandal, a pregnancy, reports of misdemeanours or secret meetings, rational discussion is inclined to end and other, deeper, more ancient, primitive modes of behaviour come to the surface.

Teachers are normally powerless when this arises. The qualities which distinguish good teachers – fair-mindedness, an ability to see all

points of view – make them weak. Inessential. Prejudices and passions take over, and nothing will calm the angers and fears that have been released except the sorts of measures that spring out of anger and fear.

Perhaps it's time to start again, trying to put the age-old debate in some newer way. After all, there have been successful co-ed schools and successful all-male or all-female schools enough in the past.

So are we having co-ed schools, or not?

Steady on, I say. What sort of school system do we want?

Do we want a *school* system at all?

Will the school system we create replicate the society around it, or choose to be different? If different, where and why?

There is always the compromise, of course, of a girls' school and a boys' school remaining separate but sharing certain activities - concerts, plays, charity and/or welfare work, particular learning projects, and so on. They are aware of each other from a distance, and occasionally close up. The merit of this is that each sex gets a look at how the other thinks, while retaining its isolation from social/sexual pressures to conform to what the other wants. It does seem a half-hearted solution, however. For my part I think that challenges are best met full on, that is, a strong institution will always be looking for ways to turn weaknesses into strengths. And perhaps the greatest weakness of most schools is their reliance on teachers as sources of authority, delineating the perimeters of learning in almost every subject. It is true that teachers can be role models; almost everyone who has been through a school can give you examples of this, but teachers would be better used, in my opinion, as guides for students working their way through a curriculum where most of the materials they will need are known, and provided. Available. Students will then have to think their way through their education processes, instead of accepting control in order to receive them. It seems to me that this way of organising the life of teaching institutions would take much of the pressure off male/female relations, though some of that pressure would always be there.

Students would learn to listen to each other, to follow and give leads, as and when appropriate. I think a teaching institution with this approach would provide a new socialisation of the people within it. The main problem of schools as authority systems is that students will inevitably chafe against the system, turning to each other for escapes from what's controlling them, whereas I think schools would be more productive if organised as systems of knowledge-learning, with few or no escape routes on offer because the school, in this case, is deliberately replicating the world – if you haven't got well-founded knowledge, you've doubt, at best, and at worst, and more likely, ignorance. Males and females are equals in this regard, and, better, they're natural partners, contributing to each other's well-being.

# The Shop

In the 1950s, the University of Melbourne was known as 'The Shop'; why, I cannot tell you. It sounded familiar. If you said the name in the right way, you were an insider. University wasn't for everybody, though you had only to matriculate to get in. That meant passing English and three other year 12 subjects, then signing the register when you enrolled. These formalities gave you entry to the club.

And a club it was, particularly if you were resident at one of the colleges, as I was at Trinity. We lived on the premises, had our meals, suppered together and talked for hours, sat in front of fires, read newspapers, sipped coffee after dinner. It was a gentleman's life, it cost money, but was pleasantly uncommercial. It was a way of life to which one belonged – or didn't. A few students didn't fit in, usually because they hadn't had the Melbourne Grammar or Geelong Grammar background of most of us.

It was a great relief to be at Trinity after the rigours of boarding school. It was what school should have been like, but wasn't. We could bring guests to the dining room for lunch, we signed a book and the charge went on our end of term bill. Money didn't flow so quickly in those days. Lectures were only a stroll away, in the university proper; the college had tutorials and a library of sorts, though my main reason for going there was to play music on the college gramophone. One could sit by the hour, in a deep armchair, surrounded by books, many of them leatherbound. I did this when I had time. At other times I prowled the recesses of the Baillieu Library, finding what was on the shelves I wasn't forced to visit by reading lists. I read hundreds of pages in French. I found slim vols of poetry pressing against each other, giving a feeling, often enough, that mine were the first eyes to explore these caches of words. My decision to become a writer lay years ahead but it's strange to remember how much more strongly I was affected by music than by words on paper. Music spoke directly to the mind while words could be argued about, and were.

Our lecturers, or those we thought most highly of, were polished performers. Notable was Ian Maxwell, Professor of English, and famous for his love of Milton, about whom he would make a few remarks before dropping his eye on a book open before him at Canto 1 of Paradise Lost. He would say, 'You'll remember that it goes something like this' before launching into hundreds of lines of the mighty poem: it was a source of joy to students basking in the professor's reputation that he would slowly release himself from the book and let delivery take him to a corner of his platform, where he might address a line or two to a latecomer, or lift his head on a surge of Miltonic thought to reach those at the back, high above. Those who'd heard him in earlier years would ask about this year's performance and it seemed to all of us that the master was holding up well. Many years later, when I was working at Preston, Delia Rendle (Maxwell), the professor's daughter, was working with us and it fell to me to collect her father on a day when he was to talk to her students. I went to his not very tidy room and ushered our guest to my car. He was amiable enough as a passenger but it was only when he was in front of students, quoting lines of Eliot, this time, that he became his genuine, because legendary, self.

I sense that this is an aspect of university life that has dwindled, that is, the interplay of students and teachers whereby long-term professors created a persona which they themselves, together with their students, would then live up to. Does it happen today? It must. As frequently as it did? I cannot say, but doubt it. Universities have changed ...

Do I want *my* university, Melbourne of the fifties, back again? That's impossible, but it was a happy time for me, and I'll enjoy searching for memories. Education was not yet mass education, though it was on the way. It was a thing you were privileged to be in and you were meant to have moments of realising that *noblesse* obliged, even as you indulged yourselves. I recall being told that the university would be making its traditional foray into the centre of the city on a certain day, and joined a

couple of hundred kindred spirits in Swanston Street. They seemed to know why they were there; I had no idea. We marched along the side of the road until we got to the edge of the city proper, then we moved to the middle of the road. Pedestrians made way; cars pulled over, or waited until we'd passed. Before long it seemed to me that we were no more than nuisances – *larrikins*, if we weren't obviously of the wrong class – getting in people's way. I felt uncomfortable, and couldn't bring myself to make the cheeky remarks that my fellows were hurling at the public. When we reached the Town Hall I slipped under the portico, hoping not to be recognised, then turned to walk north. 'Back to where I belonged', I might have told myself, for I certainly didn't think that the centre of the city was mine. I must assume now that what I had taken part in was a relic of pre-war Melbourne when students felt sufficiently superior to commoners to parade their untouchability. If this were so, it seemed ghastly. My schooling at Melbourne Grammar had made me take responsibility seriously. I, like all my fellows, had had to listen to the names of our predecessors who'd died in World Wars 1 and 2, so that it was impossible for me to feel scatty or scornful in the face of the public, to whom we owed our privilege.

Do university students today feel such feelings? I cannot tell. If I go into libraries I can see they're working hard, but as to what drives them, and how different it's making them from what I was, years ago, I cannot say.

A few weeks before I entered the University of Melbourne, fire destroyed its gothic Wilson Hall. The famous building was a pile of rubble. Time passed, and the council began to rebuild. A Sydney artist called Douglas Annand was commissioned to do a low-relief sculpture on the wall behind the stage, and he took up residence at Trinity. The college was in vacation and more or less empty but there were always strays around, and I had the privilege of conversation with Annand, whom I liked, even though I couldn't claim to have understood him. On two or three occasions I slipped into the new hall while he was working on his elongated figure, reaching upwards for a

light suggesting truth, or aspiration. I was too young for such ideals to reside naturally in me. Societies set goals for their young, and hold the fear of failure over the heads of any who mightn't succeed. Passing in one's chosen course was the condition on which one remained in college: fail, and you were out. Continuing membership of the club depended on success. This was rarely said, but well understood. Eccentricities were tolerated if people passed, all the more so if they achieved honours, but those who failed weren't spoken of any more. The club talked to itself all the time, but not to those who'd left, unless of course they'd done so with honour, and chose to send messages of achievements back to their alma mater, as it was called.

Why did I love my university years? I wanted to become a teacher, and I had a studentship from the Education Department which paid my university fees; Father paid my college bills but I paid him back soon afterwards, and still had a little money for concerts, and Chinese meals in the city. I bought a few classical recordings, and played them in the quiet of the library. We had open fires in those days and most of us spent periods of exertion on the woodheap, where the logs on offer seemed forever green. Some of us had no idea of managing fires; I remember a chimney catching fire one night in the top floor of Bishop's building, and the fire brigade arriving. Students by the dozen stood around to watch, and being talkative, to comment. I was near enough to hear one fireman ask, 'Are these kids always like this?' and another reply, 'You'll get used to it. Take no notice.' It made me aware that what was natural to residents might look strange to those outside. The college had its ways, we were the privileged, and the blazing chimney was a wonderful sight. It seemed a shame that the fire had to be put out, but what was the alternative? A heap of rubble like Wilson Hall? Best to let the firemen spray their hoses. If we lost the Bishop's building some of us would have to live elsewhere and that would be a bother ...

I'll ask you to take the irresponsibility of the above paragraph as my first answer to my question. Being at university allowed us to

delay the processes of growing up, or more accurately, to slow them down so that we could accept them as and when we felt like it. I think one chooses better when not forced to choose, or is allowed to choose very slowly, and after a fair amount of trial and tasting. I had four years at university without failing to meet any deadlines, but others, I was aware, put their energies into the student newspaper, clubs, or productions of plays, and managed just as well, even though their degrees might come a year or two later. Some dropped out, then hung around the place, almost as much students as those still in courses, because that was how they thought about themselves. You could always pick up again where you'd left off, or so we said ...

The university was a place of knowledge, of acquiring it, or discovering. I spent hours in the library, reading things I was never going to study. I listened to conversations among fellow Trinitarians who were on the way to becoming doctors, ministers of the church, architects, lawyers, etc. What did they think about? I was curious, I'm curious today. It was important to get knowledge in the areas which would be examined – and that didn't give medicos much spare time – but it was equally important, I felt, to use every opportunity to make one's knowledge a little broader. Knowledge was descriptive, and ignorance was a name for all the areas you hadn't thought about – yet! That word 'yet' was translated by thousands of students into a claim that they would investigate its meanings one of these days, when they had time, when the opportunity made itself available ...

At the beginning of my second year I had to do military training for three months at the army base of Puckapunyal, sixty miles north of Melbourne. University students had a company to themselves; localising the problem was the army's way of dealing with us. This neither pleased me nor displeased me; I felt sufficiently like the young men in other companies, though they swore a lot more than we did and had quaint ways of exercising their imaginations. I spent an hour or two on most nights reading books on the courses I'd be returning to, in particular a book on the French revolution of 1789: there was a

chapter given to the attempt by Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette to flee in a carriage and reach safety across the borders of France. The author detailed the unpredictable happenings that caused the monarch's dash to fail: I wasn't at all sure that I wanted him to succeed, because I was on the revolutionaries' side rather than the monarchists', but none of this entered my head when I was given a weekend's leave and decided to travel north on a bus with about thirty other soldiers (nashos) to see my parents in New South Wales. Before we were halfway to the border it was dark, and the driver and the non-university soldiers seemed to have an agreement that there would be time for a quick beer whenever anyone was getting off. The bus emptied itself into the darkness about as quickly as the dormitories of my schooldays had emptied when roll call was due. There were a number of these stops, and each time I sat in the bus, having no wish to drink beer or exchange bullshit with my fellow trainees. I sat, they came back noisily after fifteen minutes, and off we went again. Travelling through the countryside by night was a way of coming to terms with it, knowing and accepting: it was no part of the army's indoctrination, of course, but I was learning to love the country I might be called on to defend.

A year later, still on my parents' farm in New South Wales, I was given the job by Mother of keeping the fire going under the large hemisphere of copper in which our shirts and sheets were boiled. Father's sister Olly was staying with us, and she decided that this would be a good moment to investigate the mind of the lad who'd gone to university. 'What are you studying down there, Ches?' A little more pointedly she added, 'What are you interested in?'

I thought. My eyes moving between the fire I was minding and the eyes of my well-loved aunt, I said, 'I'm interested in history. Literature. French. Music, of course ...' It occurred to me that I should return the query. 'And what are you interested in, aunt?' Olly was quick. 'Just looking at country,' she said. 'I can't think of anything better.'

Looking at country! You couldn't do anything else if you lived on a farm. Country spread around for hundreds of miles! When Father

came back from a trip in search of sheep to buy, he would lay the map of New South Wales on the table and pore over it with loving fingers, showing me where he'd been. 'Nyngan,' he'd say, touching the map. 'We stayed the night there and then we heard about a likely prospect at Trangie.' He moved his finger. 'Nice sheep but they wanted too much.' He'd name a figure. 'And you'd have to add travelling costs on top of that to get them here. A truck or a drover, you're paying one way or the other.' That was Father, that was land, that was what he and Ollie loved.

Not for me. I'd take the French Revolution, and the attempts by the nobilities of surrounding countries to contain what they couldn't overthrow. I'd already learned, at school, about the many attempts, in nineteenth century France, to continue the revolution and the equally forceful attempts to turn it back as far as possible. The revolution hadn't ended, but had contributed to any instability still existing in the notoriously individualistic people of France. They *wouldn't* be controlled, even by the Nazis, who had the Resistance to deal with. The history of another country was fascinating, the history of my own, when I came to study it, seemed to lack fire in the imagination, or cultural movements worth arguing about. I knew that it was my fate to be Australian, I was proud of it, and yet it was something that forced one close to apologising for being part of such an uninteresting place.

My subject, then, at university, my only true subject, was humanity and its history, its cultural forms, the ways in which it thought, expressed itself and acted: that was big enough to take a lifetime to master!

Eventually I came to music. I'd always liked it well enough but I'd never been surrounded by people who loved it as musicians, as composers, loved it. Strangely, it was the army that brought me what I didn't know I wanted. In my platoon at Puckapunyal was a young man called Don Adams, a former quiz kid, extraordinarily clumsy and just as clever, self-educated, and a primary teacher. He was living with his grandparents in Collingwood, a suburb that hadn't yet recovered

from depression and war. He said I could visit him and he'd play me some of the music he liked to talk about. Time passed, and I did. His grandparents were hospitable but they had little enough; Don said that if I wanted to 'really' hear music, on a quality machine, I should join him at Vans Ovenden's house, 21 Grey Street East Melbourne. It was in walking distance of college, but after Vans had insisted on driving me home in his ancient Fiat, much the worse for wear after drinking deep into a flagon of sherry, I bought myself a bike! I've written about this household elsewhere, but I introduce it here by way of reminding myself that leisure, spare time to fill, is an essential part of a young person's development. Educators are inclined to think of curriculum as a vast area to be filled by careful instruction, but education is as much about a readiness to absorb as it is about the material to fill those gaps! I was never more ready than when I visited Vans' home, with its loudspeaker system bricked into a corner of the front room. Vans had made his own amplifier, and he was experimenting with cutting long-playing discs; he'd once been a violinist but his hands were shaky, now, under the influence of alcohol. His father and his brother, both of them living nearby in East Melbourne, ran an optical practice in the city, its windows overlooking the town hall. I visited Vans there on numerous occasions, because I knew that he felt he should make an appearance most days of the week, even if all he contributed was a few comments about items in *The Herald*, which he read as he drank coffee. Father George and Brother John accepted him as he was, and that, I thought, was the miracle that Vans introduced into the world. It was possible to be bohemian and survive. Vans loved Bach, Beethoven and Mozart, Papa Haydn too; he loved the songs and chamber music of Franz Schubert, which came close to his recipe for music to get ready for the making of love. I started to buy more records, and I took them to Vans' place now, not the college library, because they seemed a little lonely, or distanced from the world when I played them in Trinity's patrician rooms, but, surrounded by Vans' noisy, often drunken, friends, the music became something else: as blood was to the body, music was

to the world. I read a lot about music, when I had time; I read the lives of composers, their patrons and the demands of the church. It was all so far away, in a Europe only distantly resembling its creations in Australia, but when, eventually, and years later, I heard music in European cathedrals, concerts and opera houses, I knew exactly where I was. I'd come *home*, to the lands of music from which I'd been exiled by Australian birth: it took a number of years, and three or four visits to Europe, to decide that I didn't envy the Europeans what they'd made for themselves, much as I admired it at times.

It may seem to the reader that we've wandered far from the University of Melbourne in the nineteen fifties, but it seems to me that going to Europe was only an extension of going to university; that all life is a journey and with any luck it can be a journey of learning, not of misery, nor even of personal or financial success. Finding in myself a profound affinity with music meant that for me the journey need have no end. Music bonded heart and mind, thought and feeling, it led to surmising, philosophising, and care for others similarly affected. Music linked, and bonded, human beings, so it was educative in the most generous sense. My discovery of music in my university years meant that those years gave onto all the things I knew little about, at that stage, and made me ready for whatever developments lay ahead when my university years were behind.

I was in for some awful shocks when I started teaching, but I'd been made strong enough to absorb the shocks and take them into my learning systems. I could hardly have been less ready for teaching, because I'd used my university years to keep myself sheltered from the world's brutalities, but university had served me well, because it allowed me time and emotional space to develop, and I had developed, largely by doing things that lay outside the curriculum printed in the handbook. Those were the motions one had to go through, and interesting motions they were, for the most part, but the freedom surrounding what was compulsory was the true, and enormously broad, field of my university learning.

## The sketch filled in

I knew about sheep, cattle, horses and dogs because they were all around me. I knew a little about birds but not as much as those who raided nests for eggs. Some boys collected what they discovered, others dropped them on the ground, smashing them. That must have taught me something? My male teachers were a little more genial than the females; that must have told me something too. I could see that poverty was debilitating, and, since almost everyone in our district was poor, we had to live within our means. Some did this better than others; my parents were skilful, and proud. No splurges of drinking or betting for them. I still have, courtesy of Mother, a photo of my grade 4 class. What an ill-dressed, dishevelled little mob we were. Mother produced it when I'd forgotten my companions of childhood. She was at the age when she took some pleasure in recounting the grimness of fate. I was shaken to hear what had happened to this one and that. They'd seemed stable enough at Finley State School, when I lived day by day, and thought everything was normal if the kids that had been around me yesterday were there today. What more did anyone expect?

Education, the subject of this memoir/essay, is about the correction of humanity's short vision and this means that a lot of teaching in the early years, when children are too young to have much grasp of what long term vision might be, is a matter of pushing into the mind the things it's going to need later on. Children can hardly be expected not to resist! Teaching at that level is a matter of imposing by authority and drawing out in the search for fun, or pleasure. It's also a matter of keeping groups together, because little children's personalities, delightful as they may be to their parents, are displeasing, by and large, until they've been socialised, even though that may be the wrecking of them. It's such a balancing act. They must be contained, they must be put through training, even though their personalities haven't yet developed to the point of them knowing much of what they want: in

a sense, early childhood is an extension of that phase when the child enjoys saying no or knocking things down because it doesn't yet know how to build or have the grace to say yes. What it's fashionable to call the ego has to be developed before it can learn restraint; the two, it seems, go hand in hand.

Children are acutely aware of confidence and self-doubt. Confidence partners strength, and doubting oneself goes with timidity. The weak get pushed to the wall. Thus, early education must be co-operative, communal, with the rewards of praise going to those who share, or contribute. At the latter, upper-secondary level of schooling, almost the opposite culture has developed, whereby students compete for university places, resembling racehorses entering the straight, and urged, by jockeys flourishing whips, to sprint to the line, leaving as many behind as they can. The race is to the swift! That is a part of education too, and expensive schools foster the skills that will, it is hoped, produce high marks for university entrance. Critics of capitalism never tire of pointing out its contradictions, and in education we can see the resolution of industry's need to have workers whose minds work well, but to restrain the competition to achieve the best-rewarded places to those who feel they deserve it. How to do this? Have one set of schools for the ordinary, the masses, and another set of schools for those who know what they want – high enough marks to get into the courses that they hope will set them up for life. Many teachers are aware of these divided – and divisive – aims, but find the systemic problems too great to solve, not least because they're so busy doing their daily work. I've listened to many non-teachers down the years and have never quite grown used to the incomprehension surrounding the work of teachers. You may say that teachers, for their part, don't understand the work of other people – mariners, carpenters, brewers and the like: this may be true, but I think society has a special blankness with regard to education because it doesn't *want* to understand what's going on. Perhaps if the public understood the role of education in sorting out and allocating life chances, and the

feeling of having a purpose in life, or not, then it would be forced to think more closely about the systems inside which their children, and the teachers they employ, have to function.

Schools are, for the most part, wretched places. Compare the schools you know with places used only for a few minutes, like airport lounges. Throw in luxury hotels, spas, glamorous pools and candle-lit dining tables. Bring on wine waiters, chefs, and musicians to create the glamour that's needed for a night! Schools are spoken of as if they're important, but the money that might make them important isn't spent any more, and in most cases never was. One of the reasons why governments haven't bothered to insist on schools defining their curricula is that if schools did so they'd be able to list what they required to achieve the outcomes they'd laid down. They'd be calling for dollars! Library authorities would find it hard to resist a school which listed areas and topics for which it wanted the library to be able to assist. Every school should be giving its students the local knowledge which will be a base for its teaching of history; therefore every library in the state should have a comprehensive, thoroughly catalogued resource for the teaching of history, local or otherwise. No librarian would want to undertake such a task without reasonable certainty that the collection wouldn't be out-dated by changes in curriculum: therefore the planning and preliminary discussions about curriculum and support thereof need to be carried through exhaustively. None of this is easy, I realise, but I can't believe that a society truly wants a school system that is much more than a child-minding system unless it's prepared to do the work and spend the money that's necessary.

In the preceding paragraph I emphasized local history teaching. (It could just as easily have been local science, local agriculture, or what you will.) The key word is local. The opposite pole to being local is being global, and every school should now have as one of its key aims the development in its students of global understanding. This will require schools to have arrangements to have at least some of its students learning in another part of the world for a time, and in turn receiving

students from other parts of the world. This will only be fruitful if both ends of the arrangement are well prepared – hence the need for every area to be able to articulate itself, historically, environmentally, and so on. Political systems, and voting systems, not to mention eco-systems, will therefore have to be taught and understood, so that they can be passed on, lucidly and with understanding, to visitors. Those who get the chance to learn in other countries will, when they get back, have to share their knowledge with those who didn't go. Sharing will have to become as common as the body's circulation of blood. I've already spoken of the competitive aspect of schooling, particularly in the upper-secondary levels; what must now be achieved is the socialisation of knowledge, with students given opportunities to share what they discover rather than use it for personal advantage. It's hard to prevent private schools from thriving unless public schools believe in themselves, and that means that they must build whatever they can achieve on making education public. Making education public: what does this mean?

My mind goes back to Preston. When I arrived there, the suburb still contained a couple of tanneries, and at least one brickworks, survivors of industries that had once been mainstays. Both industries provide a good basis for studies leading in several directions. Chemistry – the transformation of substances. Sociology – the nature of the workers, and their skills, their training, if any. Historical change – if they were in decline, why was this happening, and what was replacing them? Environmental science – the effects of the industries, the fuel for brick making, the chemicals used in tanning. Economics – the amounts of money earned by these industries and how it had been spent, over the years. And so on. I see the curriculum having investigative centres, as I will call them, which provide a basis, a springboard, for each and all of the disciplines which the school wishes to use to affect the students it is training. These investigative centres needn't be limiting in their effects. Leather leads naturally to vinyl, and from there it's easy to go to wool and cotton, and watching these fabrics give way to polyesters

etc. At once we can move into the history of fabrics and the various forms of manufacturing that brought them into being, some of them pre-industrial, of course, and from there to the social usages that made them common, or made them exclusive. 'Corduroy', after all, means cloth of the king! It should be possible to give all a school's students various research undertakings, with classes broken into groups so that their discoveries and explanations of what they uncover can be compared with those of other groups; differences noted, and action taken to resolve differences of outlook or explanation.

I would like to see teaching of this investigative sort undertaken almost continually and right across the curriculum, but it could, and might best, be introduced a bit at a time in areas where it's easiest to get going. Students might themselves be used as teachers to explain their findings to junior classes who, in the following year, would be expected to go over the same ground, checking, or breaking new ground on the basis of what their predecessors had found. Teachers would spend a good deal of time managing these activities but would also be used to give stand-alone classes, either interactive, or lectures, which would fill out certain areas which the students couldn't be expected to find out for themselves. Such lectures and specialised classes, whether given by the school's own teachers or by specialists commissioned to provide something that regular staff couldn't provide, would be available from the library at any time, and groups that were falling back in their research activities through not understanding their basics, could be sent off to watch or listen to the relevant videos or tapes of lectures. Other tutorial devices for overcoming weaknesses in understanding would no doubt be devised.

If this sounds like a recipe for chaos, all I can say is that it needn't be. For each subject area there would be certain recapitulatory points which a student would not be allowed to pass without proving his/her competence in what had been learned thus far. Testing would take place and students would teach each other, as well as take part in intensive, teacher-led revision activities. Notice that the sort of school

organization I am suggesting here is very loose, in terms of timetabling, and should, and almost certainly will, involve students learning how to use their time well. This may be beyond some young people and a more disciplined, controlled, back-up may have to be provided for those who can't handle the freedom so generously distributed in what I'm proposing. I suppose I need to go on to say that at the very heart of what I'm suggesting is my view that curriculum is not simply a list of things to be taught/learned, but is an interplay between what's to be learned and the way it's learned. I have already referred to the stupidity of teaching democratic principles in an authoritarian way. What I am going on to suggest is that each part of the curriculum should be taught in a way that's appropriate to it, and that these methods, over the years of schooling, should form a guide to all the ways of learning that an imaginative institution can think of. Any reflective, thoughtful school will refine its methods over the years until it is sophisticated in combining ways of learning with a rich and diverse selection of things to be learned.

This series of suggestions began, I remind the reader, with the idea of making education public. Much of what any school would include in its curriculum will already be known to many people in its area, and some of them will have intimate knowledge of things not well understood by teachers. Such expertise should no more be lost than that a school should allow valuable memories of their district's past to be forgotten. This is why libraries, historical societies and the like are important partners in the delivery of well-chosen curriculum. A school's curricular needs should, therefore, be important in the commissioning and recording of local people, or visitors, talking or demonstrating in areas where they are expert. If a school fails to seize the opportunities available then the community loses. Once it becomes known that the education system feels the need for materials on various matters, they can be commissioned on a state or national basis – but this will never happen unless curricular needs are recognised as an outcome of having been stated in the first place.

I rest my case, and move on to tradition. Long ago, in my Gippsland years, I recall a gathering of parents, called to discuss how they could contribute to their sons' education. I have two main memories of the occasion: first, a feeling among parents that they ought to be doing something, with consequent frustration because they couldn't see anything worth doing; and secondly, a contribution from a man called Rury Woodhouse, an old boy of Geelong Grammar. He suggested that an old boys society be created to support the school; it might do useful things which he didn't articulate. Nobody saw much merit in this, probably because nobody expected the tech's old boys to be worth bothering about.

I remember being a little surprised at how few parents saw value in this idea. I think that they thought such associations were only for people who were socially important, as they were not. You couldn't have Old Boys unless you mattered! The sort of association suggested to me by Rury's remarks was probably not what he had in mind. I was aware by the time of the meeting of how much money was wasted in any number of ways: pub drinkers talked about 'pissing it against a wall'. I was also aware that the school I'd attended myself had never had any trouble getting old boys to pay for things that were needed. Bairnsdale's schools lacked scholarships for young people to go to university, or for people from remote districts needing help to get their sons and daughters as far as Bairnsdale. Today, schools all over the country need scholarships to create the international exchanges that globalisation makes possible, and requires. Readers will probably have their calculators out by now, wondering how much all this might cost. This would be fair comment, but the ideas I'm expressing imply a change in the public's ideas of government as the great provider. Politicians like to tell the public how much money they've spent on their behalf, but the unfortunate effect of this is that people come to think that if government won't or can't fund something then it won't or can't be done. Schools must help themselves. They have to persuade people to pay for the support staff and collections of materials needed

for the delivery of a published curriculum. They have to make their own goals community goals, and badger their communities until the money is there. They have to persuade people to leave legacies, to be invested so that there is a steady, small perhaps, but increasing, stream of cash to pay for things the school needs to do. Most of all, the school with its eyes on the future will see that its income stream is invested in people and re-usable equipment rather than buildings. Buildings are useful and necessary, but they may also be no more than empty shells. Buildings can be out-dated easily enough: time moves on and the building remains, fixed in the year it was built. Money's better used to pay people whose knowledge and skills are needed; these needs will almost certainly change over time, as will the curricular aspects needing to be supported. The spending of money needs to be targeted; large sums can be wasted with little result. Thus any endowment needs to be linked to a curricular aim. For instance, it might be stipulated that a certain endowment will be used to assist students in their transition to an informed and harmonious understanding of the interaction of males and females – a key part, one would think, of the curriculum in the early secondary years. Let us assume that this money was spent in some given year on a certain project; some of the money would need to be spent on making a record of the understandings gained so that future years don't have to repeat the activity unless, of course, they wish to extend or improve on it in some way. Money spent should add to the understandings pervading the school rather than its building stock, or replaceable equipment such as motor vehicles.

Possessing money creates almost as many problems as not having it! Being poor, however, debilitates the imagination, unless poverty can be turned into a releasing form of discipline. Some months ago I was having a conversation with a contemporary of mine and he surprised me by saying, of our childhood and youth, 'We were fortunate; we were poor.' Fortunate? This is something that must be made to happen. Schools need the discipline enforced by poverty, but they also need to know how and where to spend what money they've

got. Dollars need to make a difference. The budgeting process of a school considering its endowments will of necessity be a critique of the affluence surrounding it. There's too much money around, being spent on ephemera, but what's ephemeral and what's lasting? This is why I emphasise, over and over, the need to have curricular goals arrived at, argued about, published, and acted on. Schools should spend neither time nor money except on achieving curricular goals. So these goals must be appropriate, and good. Isn't this where the ex-students come in? If we can't get guidance from them as to the usefulness or otherwise of what we taught them, years before, where can we look?

Assuming that you accept the directions implied by that rhetorical question, where else can we, could we, look?

We should all be looking, all the time, at the things our lives depend on. Water, food, power (in both uses of that ambiguous term – political power and energy from the power point), money, clean air, the environment, and our relationship with all of the above and doubtless more.

Let's start with political power. The starting point for this would be easy: we simply record the panel presentations on TV of the results of one or more federal and state elections. We play them through to our students, we answer questions, we test their understandings, we play them through again. We give them maps divided into electorates, and we invite them to try to characterise the populations of the various electorates, and eventually – finally, perhaps – to plan a campaign for a certain party in a certain seat. Having arrived, we hope, at a reasonable level of awareness of how political systems operate, we move to those powers which operate at the margins of political systems. We invite them to list decisions or activities which trouble them: why are these allowed to continue? Who, if anybody, could restrain them? Do the activities objected to have virtues, merits, which the complainant had overlooked? Are they in fact necessary and the objection merely records the price we are willing to pay?

Anybody, I think, can play a role in a voting system, and it might also be useful to show students how a variety of voting systems will normally produce a variety of results, making it important, therefore, to have the upper and lower houses of our legislatures elected via different systems: the people's will, that important but somewhat difficult concept, is arrived at in two ways at least, and the differences between the results of the voting systems is a confusing but important factor in making our parliaments work. Similarly, I have always admired those business teachers who get their students to 'play' the stockmarket over the course of a year, investing, buying and selling, receiving imaginary dividends and deciding what to do with these (imaginary) receipts. A class can be divided into small groups competing with each other, but registering their 'transactions' with a central group, possibly including the teacher for propriety's sake, and regularly doing their accounts to see who's invested well and who hasn't. This obviously leads to any number of questions about the operation of the economy occurring to students, who then want to know the answers to these questions because they affect the performance of the 'funds' being managed by the students.

Similarly, students could be invited to state their opinions – their viewpoints – on matters of public controversy at any given time, and these opinions could be retained and brought out six, twelve, eighteen or even more months later, handed back to the students who held them, after which students could be invited to reconsider their views. This, I think, would be valuable instruction in thinking for the long term and recognising the viewpoints surrounding any controversy at the time when it's most urgent as being partial and only moderately well informed; it would show that certain views of any matter will stand up better than others over time.

I mention these things because students need training in watching the ways in which events work themselves out. Young people need to be made aware that they will normally seize on what seem to be the most salient features of any matter, but, they need to know, the balance

of factors, the various importances of various matters, will change over time. They will be forced to see what they didn't see at first.

This is a good sort of education, training the child and developing the adult. The two need to be held together; the people who've finished their schooling have so much to offer those still in it, partly by little bits of homespun advice, more broadly, by being who they are. Young people want to know what's to become of them, and the very reason why humble schools think that ex-student associations are not for them is the very reason why such associations are needed. Young people are normally keen to escape their circumstances, yet they rarely know who's done it successfully and who hasn't. Where are the traps? The opportunities? How far can young people go? And if they don't go away, if they stay for a lifetime in the place where they were brought up, how can that be made a success as well? These are not easy questions, and there are as many answers as there are people, and yet a school needs to assist its students to find answers, however incomplete. There's some guidance, some steerage, in every preceding life, and a school, or its associated organizations, should be able to build a map of the paths that earlier people have followed. Those that went far, and did outstanding service, how do they look, now, on the place where they began? Those who stumbled, whose lives were broken ... where did their later failure show itself in their early experience? Could anything have been done?

Some readers may feel that these are unusual considerations to be introduced to a discussion of how to make education operate well, but my objection to schools that don't think about these things is that they are insufficiently sophisticated to be useful. All too often schools, simply to keep themselves running, assure students that if they 'behave themselves' they'll be all right, and if they make trouble there will be trouble building for them across the horizon. Maybe. Schools need to provide security, but this can happen in many ways; I'm arguing that schools do better to make their students think about the pitfalls and

the goals that previous students have encountered before, during and especially after the schooling they've received.

Earlier in these considerations, I raised the question of what and how much a region knew, and I said that teachers were not only teaching rooms full of students but were also teaching the region from which those students came. Gippsland, which I had in mind when I raised these thoughts, was easy to delineate, and its character is strong. Urban areas are harder to differentiate, and yet the task must be undertaken. A school, looking at its students, needs to know how successful their parents are, where they've come from, what traditions are operating underneath the surface of an apparently orderly social life – if it is. Ethnic identities need to be understood, the strengths and weaknesses thereof; we have only to consider the long hegemonies of Irish Catholicism and English Protestantism in our country to recognize how long it takes for each imported wave of thinking, loyalty, hatred, hope, ambition, and likely roots of failure to play themselves out in the lives of those subject to them. Each wave of migrants is repeating the history of earlier waves in its own new way. What can we give them? I think the best we can offer is an emotionally rich, sophisticated culture, sure of itself, aware, knowing what it expects of its entrants and offering ways to success.

Does this sound like a school? I mean it to, but perhaps it doesn't. In these essays, I'm talking about *schooling* but it will not have escaped the reader's notice that learning is lifelong, and that learning taking place in schools will be conducted most effectively if it's in harmony with the learning taking place elsewhere. Or will it? Don't places of learning sometimes need to oppose practices in the world around them? I'm thinking of timber towns, which will normally do their best to stop the messages, the thinking, of conservationists reaching the minds of the young. There are important understandings to be made out of such clashes, because one has only to look to realise how mobile money is and how vulnerable the timber- and other workers are. If a teacher is discussing such matters in a classroom it's certain that children of the

loggers will put the logging case. What else can the logger do but cut the tree down, then send it to the mill? They're paid to do those things. If the argument gets to the stage where the loggers and their families starve if the trees aren't cut, then the argument has been managed in such a way as to block the conservationists' opinions from affecting the discussion. There's learning and important understandings to be made out of such clashes, but schools will have to be sophisticated in the way they prepare for such issues if they are not seen as a medium for one side only of an important discussion. I'm thinking of gun ownership in the USA, or any of the other situations where individuals want what it isn't good for society as a whole for them to have. If schools are to be social then they must be careful in balancing opinions, and demands that will inevitably be made from interested parties. I'm casting my mind back many years to my colleague Kevin Murray going into the Bairnsdale newsagency to be challenged by the proprietor over the views of the British empire he'd expressed to his class the day before. The proprietor had heard his delivery boys discussing what they'd understood of Kevin's remarks, and, being a belligerent and impulsive man, had upbraided the teacher without asking questions.

And did he have the right to ask them? A society that says free speech is a central virtue can hardly stop him, but would be advised, perhaps, to have processes in place to deal with complaints. The trouble is that complaint processes, once put in place, are there to be used: it's hard, today, to imagine anyone getting excited over a teacher's loyalty to the British empire, but we can be sure that some other, equally foolish, ideas have replaced the empire as being worthy of unquestioning loyalty. Such as?

I won't go into that!

I've now spent pages talking about schools and the systems within which they operate. There's no end to this discussion, and many more viewpoints than I've been able to think of. I want now to leave those discussions, letting them run till the end of time, and turn to something

which teachers can only develop after years in the classroom, namely an innate, partly dramatic, partly analytical sense of what actually happens between teachers and students. This will be discursive, and more evocative than anything else, so I hope you will stay with me. Where shall I start?

Some years before I myself went away to school in Melbourne, Mother decided that my brother must go beyond year 9 which was the highest level offered in Finley. She transferred him to Kerang High School, in northern Victoria, because he would be able to return to Barham, home of Father's family, at weekends. To ensure that the transition worked well, she moved herself and me to Barham for his first term away, and I attended Barham's weatherboard, well-shaded school. I would have been about nine. On the day I have in mind, my class was dismissed at twelve, and I stood on the verandah looking for cousins Bob and Alison with whom I would walk home for lunch. They weren't in sight, and I found myself distracted by sounds in a room beside me, the windows open, where the class was still, to my surprise, in their seats. Why? I looked in that direction. The teacher, seeing me, shouted that I was not to poke my nose into her business and that I must join those being kept in. I was amazed. I'd not been brought up to dispute authority, so I did as I was told. I sat at the back of this room full of strangers, knowing that my cousins would be on their way home, and it was clear to me that, having been arrested, I was a prisoner until the class got free. This happened before long and I scampered home, getting past the house where the old soldier raved as he paced around the lawn, making Alison, Bob and I laugh when we were safely at a distance. I told Mother why I was late but she seemed to think it no more than a natural hazard of schooling, though I was filled with a sense of injustice. That silly woman had dragged me in because she was in a fury and had seized an opportunity to focus her anger with her class – *her* class – on me!

Moral: an education system is founded on a belief in justice.

Time passed and Mother and I returned to Finley. I rejoined the class that was properly mine. Mr Murdoch said that I'd arrived at a very good time. I discovered that an area at the back of the school, shaded by some large trees, had been turned into a model of an irrigation scheme. Tiny channels ran away from slightly larger ones, the whole thing supplied, I must imagine, by a tap, although I'm uncertain about this because Finley buildings, like our farm house, collected rain in tanks. Water was not to be wasted. That was something taught by daily life, not by the school. Why was the school creating a model irrigation layout? I'd missed the explanations that began the activity, but heard Jack Murdoch tell the other children that they now had someone – and he meant me! – who *really* understood how the scheme should work. Oddly enough, I did, and could see that the model wasn't well made because it hadn't been surveyed. There were places where it would only work if water flowed uphill! I was too shy to say this. I knelt down and scratched a foot or two of channel until we went inside again.

Moral: don't show off!

A couple of years later, I went away to school in Melbourne. I did well, I worked my way to year 12, and studied a book called *A House is Built* by M.Barnard Eldershaw (Marjorie Barnard and Flora Eldershaw). It forced me to think about the value of success. Things go wrong for the merchant family at its centre, though they've made a fortune and built a fine home. It seemed to me that if you set yourself a goal then you might fail to reach it, but that the problems you faced if you succeeded were just as great. If you achieved the peak you'd set for yourself, what then? You must either gracefully retire or set yourself another goal. What would I do? At eighteen, I didn't know.

A year passed. I was home for university vacation and Mother asked me to get some library books in town. (I had a driving licence by now.) Books meant going to Rhoda Lewis's lending library, threepence per book per week. I looked along the shelves of well worn mysteries, adventures and romances, and among them I came across *Tomorrow*

*and Tomorrow*, a later book by Barnard Eldershaw. Nobody had told me they'd written more than one! I borrowed *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*, pleased that I knew where the title came from, and was drawn in straight away. Barnard Eldershaw's characters struggled with the depression of the thirties, then suffered the years of war. Eventually, Sydney was burned, its population fled to the countryside, the country's history was forever changed and a new society, better – or was it? – was created. I read this on our farm, three miles west of Finley. I was myself a child of the depression, and of the war that followed; I'd been to Sydney a few times, it was a book that questioned the validity of the world I had been and was still becoming part of. It struck at my world, yet it drew me in because it made me feel passionately about its characters. Sydney's Anzac memorial resonated throughout the book; as we drove down Murray Street to the point where the Deniliquin Road turned to go past our farm, we passed the little park containing Finley's war memorial. Every town had one. They weren't well kept but they were kept better than cemeteries. People rarely entered this park. Respect meant keeping away. Yet it linked Finley with Sydney, and the world's events. There were links, mysterious as they might be. My grandmother had frames on the wall in her passage, containing pressed flowers, a verse or two, connecting her house with the service of two of Father's brothers, who'd fought in France. So literature could take one's thoughts into that world of largely unspoken links with something vast and awful. One might come at it in any number of ways, and I'd found one for myself, by stumbling on *Tomorrow and Tomorrow*: I felt a little more mature for having read it.

I began to ask myself, what next?

At university, I dived into the bookroom when they were having sales. Something good might be cheap. I discovered a book about Carl Nielsen; I'd already discovered his 4th Symphony (The Inextinguishable). I didn't know it then but the symphony was composed in 1916 in response to the bloodshed taking place in France. Nielsen was horrified by what was happening. I can't imagine that

anyone fighting on the Somme knew or cared about his protest, but ninety-two years have passed, his music's still played, and the guns of northern France have rusted. It's hard to put the music in words – that's why it's music – but it's about conflict, there's a dark side and a positive, and it's the positive that wins. And again, as with Barnard Eldershaw, there was a later, more sophisticated work, and I didn't know about Nielsen's 5th Symphony until I'd read Robert Simpson's book. I got a recording of the 5th, I was amazed by its grandeur and its intellectual flexibility, and I knew I had a long way to go.

Carl Nielsen had died a couple of years before I was born. I felt that a little of his spirit had crept into mine; a silly idea, but I certainly felt a continuity between the Dane and myself. He was nearer to my time than the gods of European music – Bach, Handel and the rest. They were beyond me, but Nielsen was contemporary enough to set me a standard. I wondered how this man called Simpson had come to know so much about Carl Nielsen. I couldn't believe he'd got it from lectures, as I was getting my knowledge, so what tuning devices did Robert Simpson have to pick up things in the ether?

That was something else for me to learn. There had been a boy called Simpson at my school, in my years of riding from the farm to Finley. His father, whom I rarely saw, was something to do with the Irrigation Commission; I met his mother more often, when I went to the Simpsons' home after school, or at the weekend. Sydney reclaimed the Simpsons before too long, but I recall a day when Ian and I were playing at his home and he mentioned that someone we knew was in hospital: he pronounced it 'horse piddle', and I was very amused. Boys of a certain age love humour of that sort. Ian's mother overheard him, and said 'Ian!' with a mixture of reproach and amusement that I've never forgotten. My own mother's morality was strict and clear. Ambivalence wasn't part of her world. Mrs Simpson saw why we were laughing, she thought it funny too, yet it was her duty, her role, to temper our amusement with a judgement, almost disembodied, that we were being vulgar, and well brought up little boys ...

Et cetera. Trivial as this may seem, it has its place in this book, because it was a moment of learning. Other mothers had their ways of influencing their children, and the messages they despatched weren't necessarily the same as those I heard at home. This was fascinating, and I don't think that the learning process that began with Mrs Simpson's reproach – so courteously delivered, and aimed at her son, not his visitor, who was laughing too – has finished yet.

Perhaps it never will ...

**F**ather's worldview was less black and white than Mother's. Over dinner one night I told him that I'd ridden home from school 'the back way'. This meant I'd taken a road leaving Finley from the south-west corner, not the north-west. I'd ridden past the saleyards, and a few poor homes, little more than shanties, sprinkled around that corner of town. Father mentioned a man who lived in one of these dwellings, a man whom I knew had no money. Father was amused by wastrels, because he had no fear of becoming one of them. How could he, working as hard as he did? Mother was tighter, though even she had occasionally to smile because that was what the district did with its problem people. This man, whose name I forget, owed a sum of money to one of Finley's shopkeepers, who kept at him for payment. Try as he might, the shopkeeper could never find his man at home. He knew his man was avoiding him, but persisted, only to be told, by a smiling debtor when finally he had him trapped, as he believed, at his front door, 'Sorry, but there's just one problem; I never sign cheques on Thursdays!'

Father thought this funny, but I, at ten or eleven, couldn't see how you could get out of paying money with that sort of rubbish. Couldn't sign cheques on Thursdays! I think I was outraged in the way of Mother, but Father thought it funny. It was the illogic that amused him. In the telling of a story, as he knew and I didn't, the punch line couldn't be examined. It punched, and that was it! Father paid his debts, Father never got taken to court, so why was he laughing at the man who

couldn't get his money back? It was quite beyond me to realise that someone who was obedient to, was restricted by, the financial system might have sympathies for someone who was cheekier, more daring.

I was sent to school in Melbourne. This was a harder world than the one I'd known. Mother stayed in Melbourne to be near me during my first term away, as she'd done for my brother. I asked her to take me to the district cricket final, and she did. I was used to watching cricket games because Father was Finley's captain. I wasn't good at the game myself but it was part of my formal reality. Cricket represented something, probably the virtuous, because competitive, life of a man. I watched the day's play with Mother: of it, today, I remember nothing except L.O'B. Fleetwood-Smith, formerly an Australian spinner, swiping a couple of boundaries before being bowled. The innings concluded, Fleetwood-Smith being the last man in, something I, not being good at the game, understood well.

We returned to school. Mr Stanley, the boarding house master, was affable to Mother, then, when she'd gone, he asked me why I'd gone to watch – he named the two clubs – when a Grammar team had been playing. Which Grammar team? Probably the Under 11 C team, but it was a Grammar team, and I'd given other clubs priority and he left me in no doubt that I'd broken an unwritten rule. Any Grammar boy should know where his loyalties lay. That was one of the nastiest lessons I've ever learned, ending what had been an enjoyable day. Mother had intended me to be happy but a darker, more dictatorial, reality had clouded her son's gift.

Decades passed, and I learned that Harold Stanley, once boarding house master, had ended his life when he became aware that some of his activities with boys were to become public knowledge. I felt a passing sympathy for him, but it seemed to me that he'd made a mistake in taking up a position of enforcer for a powerful male institution, which would support him only as long as he served it. No longer than that. The school, as I've already mentioned, was reverential in honouring those of its old boys who'd 'laid down their lives for their country',

as our service had it, but was rather more dismissive of those who, it believed, had let it down, when, perhaps, it had let itself down by choosing whomsoever it chose for jobs where some delicacy and considerable self-effacement were required.

Melbourne Grammar was an institution that looked after its own, but was thin-skinned about certain areas of life, notably those where sexual activities and the school's notions of its honour came close to each other. I've written elsewhere about headmaster Sutcliffe's advice about choosing a partner for the school dance, held once a year; it was made clear that the normal thing for us to do – the *normal*: how much of an instruction was that! – was to bring someone from one of our sister schools, sister meaning private, or fee-charging, schools attached to a branch of the Christian, preferably Anglican, church. Years passed, and I became aware that, as an Old Melburnian, you were safe, that is to say accepted and included, if you turned up to functions, notably weddings, in what had come down from British traditions as a 'dinner suit', something we ridiculed by calling it a penguin suit. We might laugh at the garment so long as we wore it, and, wearing it, we wore the air of virtue, of propriety, that it gave.

One of the remarkable things about the Melbourne Grammar world was that it was taken for granted that Grammar boys would know those unwritten rules, and abide by them. At the end of my second year at university I decided that I would get a job for the weeks between exams and Christmas; I discovered from an office at university that Dammans, tobacconists in the city, needed a couple of extra hands. I walked down and enquired about the job. Mr Geoff Damman, manager of the store, came to have a look at me. He was wearing a suit. I was wearing grey trousers, open-necked khaki shirt, and I had three or four days growth on my chin. The conversation was simple, but revealing:

'What school did you go to?'

'Melbourne Grammar.'

'All right, start on Monday.'

Readers may think I'm satirising Mr Damman, but I can't do that without satirising myself. I had been well aware, when I went to the shop, that there had been a Damman in my year 12 class two years earlier, so I felt – without any obvious right to do so – that the shop was part of my world. The school looked after its own. I turned up the following Monday, in good time, in a smart grey suit, and shaven. I was on my best behaviour in the weeks that I worked there, and I thanked the various Dammans on the day that I left. Nobody expected any less.

Nor did I expect any less of myself. When, fifty years later, I attended a reunion of my year 12 group, I was in no way surprised to find them alert and affable. We greeted each other warmly, as if the half century had lasted no longer than the five minute break we'd once had between classes. We knew each other well. We spoke to each other as if those fifty years hadn't happened. I noticed the easiness of our relating to each other, the courtesies we'd been short of when boys, the attention we gave each other in our talking. Something, perhaps many related things, had been imprinted on us. We were a group, however individually we felt about ourselves, of like-mannered men. I found myself wondering, in the days that followed, if similar groups from other schools would have felt the same, and wasn't sure. On the whole, I doubted it. Our famous school had imposed itself on us so that we carried a responsibility to its standards that we should never let down. In our chatter we reminisced about headmaster Hone and the masters of our years, characters all. We spoke, naturally enough, as if they had formed us, but they too, I realised when I thought about it, had been formed by the thing that was forming us. A school, whether grand or degraded, is itself a cloud of expectations that settle on the heads of those who go into it. Curriculum, as I never stop saying, is vital, but even more influential is the ghostly, almost numinous presence, hovering in the air and in the minds of all who attach to it, forming, setting out the expectations it's requiring. Do I believe in ghosts? Not really, but I do believe in layers of thought resonating

with and/or against the layers of the mind that education affects to manage. Unstated requirements, undefined influences, give us our awarenesses of what's allowable, what's expected, and what's not. I've heard, as no doubt you have, dear reader, teachers making threats about the punishments that will fall on any boy/girl who breaks the ruling just laid down that such and such shall or shall not be done. Statements of this sort almost demand that they be disobeyed, because they make such claims that the students, sensing the claims aren't true, understand that the threats must be tested, tested they are, and, normally and usually, the threats are found to be empty. A school, then, is an agreement, and if it is to function the students and staff must be made, in one way or another, to stick to the agreement. Canings, strappings, beltings, roars of abuse or sneers of the most penetrating sarcasm – all are useless unless there's something positive there which the students know will bring results.

In a good school, students believe in the school: it's as simple as that.

**A**nd the teachers? What do they believe in? How well do they understand the places they work in? Do they ever stop to see how their schools look to outsiders, particularly those youngsters who've just been enrolled, or is it, perhaps, forced to enrol?

I am reminded of Ralph Ciavarella, a young boy from an Italian family who was at Bairnsdale Tech. in my early days. In today's multicultural Australia his name might have been pronounced *Cha*-varella, but in Ralph's day he and his family were *Siv*-arella to those who bothered to call them anything. I speak of a time when there were no biros, and somebody had to fill the inkwells every morning so that boys could dip their pens and drop blobs of ink on their desks, or even flick tiny drops at the backs of hated masters (I was one, I discovered one day when I took my coat off).

I was writing on the blackboard a few minutes before the day's first class, and turned as someone came through the door. It was Ralph, a

small fellow, with black hair and a modest investiture of charm, and he was carrying a tray loaded with inkwells, filled in a huge old shed stuffed with mining and motor-age wreckage pushed there over the years; the shed housed the stores of ink for classrooms, as well as an unknown population of cats which were given milk, when he had some, by George Carver, the cleaner. Ralph was at the door, and at his feet was a large blob of ink. 'Ralph,' I said, 'you've spilt some ink.' He looked at me as innocence required. 'I haven't spilt any ink, sir,' he replied. Inexperienced as I was, I did understand his meaning: he wasn't *aware* that he'd spilled any ink, and he certainly hadn't *intended* to spill any ink, therefore he *hadn't* spilled any ink. I told him where there was a rag to wipe the lino, and he wiped it, innocent as previously stated. The responsibility for the ink, and for him having to wipe it, was mine, at least in Ralph's mind.

That was another lesson for me, moving in the opposite direction to what, conventionally, was the proper stream-flow for a school, where knowledge, it's generally assumed, runs downhill from society's heights, embodied in the teacher, to the pupils, lowly beings, even the brightest of them. Ralph's blob of ink ... and the day hadn't even begun!

I want to swing now to another experience, closer to the end of my teaching days, which gave me, perhaps, the same instruction in reverse. The education system at the time allocated schools a certain number of special duties allowances, known as SDAs; the school decided how it would allocate these duties, then invited its staff to apply. SDAs were sought after because they were signs of approval for teachers hoping to gain promotion. I was head of humanities at Preston TAFE, but the department had some years previously decided that it would operate on democratic lines, which meant meetings, motions, and votes. Admirable as this may have been in theory and for much of the time in practice, it could be irksome for the head of department who frequently found himself squeezed between a department which had told him what it wanted and an administration that expected him

to exercise authority over those in his ranks. (As one of my friends likes to say, 'You can't win; there's only several ways of losing!') So the SDA positions had been advertised and three, I think, members of my ('my'?) department had applied. The applications went before a committee and the committee, meeting in the director's office, though he wasn't there, had narrowed the three to two, after which they called in the department head. Me. It was explained that the committee was seeking my advice on the matter and I was invited to sit in the only empty chair.

This was the director's chair. I went around his desk to take the seat, and found that, out of sight of anyone else in the room, because hidden by the desk, was a low platform on which the chair rested. I sat, looking over, no, looking down on, the SDA committee, including its chairman, the deputy director, a man I liked. They asked me to comment on the two contenders. Both, I said, would be good in the position. I was asked further questions. My answers were so even-handed as to be exasperating. My position felt doubly compromised. I had only to give a wink or a nod for one candidate and that one would have got the position, but it was not lost on me that word about my summons before the committee would get back to my colleagues and I would have been accused of undemocratic behaviour. Our proceedings were explicitly designed to stop the head of department from having the powers that had been thrust on me by the committee. And there was the matter of the director's chair. I'd never sat in it before, so I'd never known about its height advantage. The director spent his day looking down on those who came to see him. I'd been to see him on any number of occasions, and I thought I knew his wiles, tricks and threats about as well as anyone could.

But there was a trick I didn't know. I thought about that seat, that height advantage, for days. I'm thinking about it now. What did it mean? What did it give him that others, unaware of his advantage, didn't know? I think it added a certain mystique of authority to the director, a little extra something on top of the aura of his office,

with secretary outside and private toilet hidden off. The director, in his chair, had something you didn't know about; his desk was wide enough for the added height not to be apparent. This meant that the advantage was in the director's mind. He wasn't seeing you in quite the way you thought. How long had that little platform been there? Who'd installed it? I was quite prepared to believe that the director of my time had done this but had to accept that it was probably one of his predecessors. Who, and why? I knew I'd never know, but it made me aware of a weakness in myself that I hadn't recognised until then. It wasn't part of my temperament to challenge authority. I'd never rebelled against my parents, partly because they'd made me autonomous from an early age so there was no need, and partly because by the time I reached the age when boys rebel, I was part of the system in force at Melbourne Grammar, and there was no beating that: one would have been foolish to try. Besides, as I'd seen in my Trinity years, the rewards for conformity, or going along, were considerable. I'd seen this when I'd started to teach in Bairnsdale; men who were far more mature than I were carrying chips on their shoulder that I didn't have. My upbringing, and my schooling, had given me a certainty that there was nobody on earth possessed of superior status to mine. Courtesy and consideration come much more easily to those who know they don't have to touch their forelock here and there, and I, and the boys who'd worn the navy blue with me, had that pride and confidence.

Many of my Preston colleagues saw things differently, via a critique of society emanating from their political allegiances and their ideologies stemming from a variety of writers who can be summed up by mentioning Marx and Freud: the society and the mind. To someone of my outlook, these ideologies chipped away at society's beliefs; to my more radical colleagues, educated differently, and made more different by their reading and thinking, the ideas I called 'society's beliefs' were in fact the methods by which society was deceived into accepting a regime, of power, of ideas, that benefited a relatively small number at

the top, while whatever was left over trickled down to the levels on which the masses existed. To me, too, this was obvious, but my way of dealing with the situation was, I dare say, typical of my upbringing. I've already quoted my slogan, 'Fight only the battles you can win; occupy other ground surreptitiously'. For me, the existence of a program designed to get people into university who would otherwise never have got there, with the consequent opening up of universities themselves, was a significant piece of surreptitious occupation. For a number of my colleagues, it wasn't enough. They looked for opportunities for confrontation, which meant that their wishes, their instinctive policies, contradicted my innermost tendencies, as quoted above. I was prepared to be as stubborn, perhaps devious as was necessary to achieve long term goals, but I was too proud to fight and lose.

Make of that, dear reader, what you will!

I never learned to trust my director. He was smart, yet narrow, affable when it suited him, yet tricky. There is a sense in which administration is essentially manipulation. Directors don't have time to embroil themselves in detail. They state policies, they get others to write guidelines, they allocate money and they decide the timing of their various moves. They choose their councillors, or they let certain of them choose themselves, which is even smarter. They create structures for others to work in, and the rules that bind them – if they do. The real test of directors, though, is whether or not they're prepared to have people working for them who are cleverer, better or smarter than they are. Someone who's sure of their abilities, someone with a good mind, isn't afraid of others with equal or greater abilities, because he or she is able to articulate what's wanted, and then to let others get on with doing it. If this requires greater intelligence or greater gifts than those of the articulator, then so be it. It was only after I retired from education and did some part-time work in – you guessed it – education, that I finally worked with someone who wanted brilliant

staff because he himself was brilliant enough to match any of us. This was immensely liberating and made me realise what I'd been missing for all those years. The people I'd worked under had never been good enough.

Then a new TAFE director replaced the old. He came from another state and amazed his first heads of department meeting by knowing our names. He called us 'Steve', 'Bill', 'Lyn', 'Mary' and the rest. Good heavens! He must have learned our names from photos, he must have had his secretary, who knew us very well, identify our faces, pinning names on them in his mind. I'm sure he meant it as a way of gaining our goodwill and admiration, and it succeeded. It was around the college by lunchtime. Yet I had misgivings. Would he ever know more than that? It was the sort of trick recommended by American management courses, a sure-fire way of gaining your underlings' confidence. Take them in and hold them in the palm of your hand!

A few months passed. On the first floor of the 1930s building, above the director's office, where the Business Studies department was now installed, someone took down the photos of the old technical school teams. Ron Barassi, Bill Lawry et al disappeared. In their place the walls held half a dozen pink and grey, more or less abstract prints. If I say that the most interesting thing about them was their frames of black wood, you will appreciate their quality. I was in the Business Studies department one morning, waiting to see somebody, when I heard voices in the passage outside – the director and a couple of visitors. A voice I didn't know commented favourably on what he saw on the walls. Then my director spoke warmly of the prints I despised. 'The college needed something with character, something that stimulated the minds of people going past!'

Good god! The man might have learned my name before he'd seen me, but this was a bit much! The sporting pictures that had been taken down at least had something to do with our past. It struck me, sitting there, and pleased that I couldn't be seen, that the place had been doing its job for many years, in one form or another, and yet it seemed to have

no pride in itself. At the end of every year, the art students, and there'd been art students for who knows how long, put on a show of their work. This was held in the library (by then known as the Learning Resource Centre). When the exhibition was over, the students took their work home. The college knew nothing about them or their work once they'd left. Then I got another surprise.

The college by now had two counsellors, one for careers, one for personal guidance. The personal guidance counsellor invited Ron Barassi to talk at Preston TAFE. He came. I stayed away. Barassi was by that time the most famous name in Australian football. He'd been a premiership captain and a premiership coach. He was on the guest speaker circuit at very high fees. What fee he accepted from Preston I cannot say. What briefing, if any, he was given about the talk he should give, I have no idea. I felt fairly certain, however, that he would not have been asked to analyse the Preston he'd once been part of, or how he'd found his way out, nor what his former area had given him, in deficits and in strengths – the things our students most needed to know. The reader may think me prejudiced here, unaccepting of a perfectly reasonable sort of place ... except that it wasn't reasonable to me, wasn't acceptable, it carried the stigmata of ignorance, of being unable to lift itself. I was convinced that everybody who worked in a place like Preston needed to have it as their aim to raise their standards so that Preston people, when they went elsewhere, weren't carrying its limitations tattooed on their personalities. So I was harsh on the counsellor, harsh on Barassi I suppose, harsh on the place ...

... because that was what it needed. It's tempting to be critical of directors, council members, teaching and support staff for not being able to make the change in level that I'm asserting as preferred policy, especially since I did my best to stay in the classroom, and did so as long as I could before the inevitable happened and I too became an organization man in an organization I didn't much care for. Personal virtue and public scorn! It's one of the easiest positions to take up and

it sickens me when I see it in others, knowing, as I do, that I've been hypocritical in this matter myself.

In an earlier part of this book I referred to the time when a technical college was transforming itself into a TAFE college when nobody knew what that was supposed to mean. Opportunities opened up. Bill Sparkes, a former trade teacher, became the second man in the transitioning college. He was Christian, nicely spoken, seriously well-intentioned, and without so much as an idea in his head. He was replaced by Alby Cleaves, former woodwork teacher, a watchful man, humorous, and humble. Alby liked to talk, but he was shrewd enough to read what you thought of him out of the way you talked to him. Alby taught me something by what he told me one day when he reminisced about his days of managing building projects in the city. 'You'd be sitting in your box with your head in the plans,' he said, 'trying to work out what you were going to do next, when there'd be a knock on the wall. Some bloke looking for a job. You'd say to these blokes, what sort of job are you looking for? They'd tell you what they'd done and what they reckoned they could do, and after a while it'd dawn on you. The job they were after, the job they really wanted, was *yours*! So you'd say – haven't got much at the moment, could be something next week – and you'd get rid of them.' Alby smiled. I smiled too. I'd found a perfect characterisation of what was wrong with public education. Everybody was out for him/herself, and there was hardly anybody speaking for the state, the system, the needs of the students, hardly anybody who wasn't in some way putting self before service.

My humanities colleagues, for the most part, were exceptions to this condemnation, and there were certainly others, scattered around the college, but the place was put together, was glued, as it were, by these ambitions which, for the most part, greatly exceeded the capacities of those who held them. I began to grow weary of the college. I couldn't see it becoming what I felt it should. I had told the former director, with whom I'd argued so many times, that the

college needed a research unit so that it knew the demographics, the currents, trends, generosity and criminality, the employment paths and requirements of its region like it knew the back of its (collective) hand. I couldn't persuade him. When I got the chance to slip out, I seized it. I was invited to be the TAFE representative on the body set up to create the new certificate of education that would rebuild year 11 & 12 education, wiping out the programs I'd been working in. I crossed the city to Saint Kilda Road, and a life of meetings, telephones, and discussion papers. The government of the day had brought in optional 55 year retirement and I had decided to take it. I'd be free to write at last, and I could only hope that the superannuation system would give me enough to support me. I began to think about money for the first time in my life. It was going to be important, once there was no fortnightly cheque to keep me and my family going.

On Friday mornings, at this time of my life, I used to go to the Victoria Market early, take my shopping home, then go to Preston for a few minutes to see if anything had come up which required action from me. Normally there wasn't, so I drank tea with a colleague or two, chatted with Kevin Moore, who was holding everything together as he'd done for years, before I set off for the other side of the city. This was something I did many times, but two of these drives have stuck in my mind, for contrasting reasons. One morning, I turned on the car radio and found myself listening to Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, miraculous music, one of mankind's highest achievements. I rolled down Saint Kilda Road listening to the Benedictus, noticed a parking spot just where I wanted it and swung in as the violin solo disappeared into the silence, the heavens, from which it had come to earth. I sat for a minute before going inside.

On the other occasion, I was in the Fitzroy section of Saint Georges Road when I had to stop at a red light. Facing the other way at the same set of lights was a bright yellow, brand new Porsche, driven by a young woman of perhaps twenty two. Her hair was pale, almost white, her face was flawlessly beautiful, and her hands sat daintily

on the wheel as she waited, as I was doing, for the lights to change. They changed, she drove north and I to the south, giving me one short moment to notice that the number plate on her Porsche was one of the early message-plates. In black caps on white it said 'THANKS'. I burst out laughing. Thanks to the man, older and wealthier, who'd given her the car. Thanks. I drove through the city and down Saint Kilda Road to where I was playing my part in the creation of a new system. Thanks. I'd be out of it in a few months and I hardly knew what I felt about the career I'd built. Thanks. Had one of them got the better of the other, or had they made an equal exchange? It was an interesting question, but I knew I'd never know. I'd put a lot into my years of teaching; what had been my reward? Friends, yes. Memories of some constructive years spent in pursuit of worthwhile ideals? I could say yes to that. Many happy moments in and around the classroom with students I'd served well enough ... yes, yes ... Endless awful moments when students, other teachers or the college administration seemed to have gone out of their way to annoy me? Yes unfortunately, yes again. Did I have a sense of service? Yes, that was well-embedded. Was that reward enough? It was if I loved my fellow human beings enough to make that service into a willingly, happily given gift and ... after some hesitation, perhaps ... I could say yes to that too.

Were there any nos? I go back to the Porsche, the beautiful white-blonde, and the word THANKS. Education is a peculiar occupation. My mother had been a teacher and in taking up her former profession I think I had unconsciously accepted the way she attached her high standards of morality to work that can be pretty pedestrian. Not so for Mother, not so for me. The observant reader will probably have decided by now that my judgements of my colleagues were and still are fairly harsh. The rest of the world, the people who settle Porsche cars on desirable go-getters, would, I'm sure, have thought me pretty strange if they'd followed me around for a few days of teaching, and interacting with students, teachers and an often annoying administration. Strange because of the need that teaching imposes on those who practise it

for purity, objectivity, endless altruism, selfless aspirations attached to those other things which any reasonable teacher needs - a good dramatic sense, a capacity to explain, a willingness to lead and that toughness which is prepared to force students to follow. One could go on for pages, listing the qualities a teacher needs, and then another teacher, of a different sort, would produce a different list of qualities, and the two teachers would have to agree that there are many ways of doing this job which is so difficult, and so intensive in the ways it tests those who follow it. Two teachers? We could have dozens, all drawing up lists, and we wouldn't be able to bring the matter to an end. What makes a good teacher? My simple, probably silly, answer is the ability to bring about the learning of good lessons, of whatever sort they may be. This, as I have tried to show, doesn't always take place in classrooms, but that's where the public expects them to take place, so let us concentrate the last part of this book right there.

## The classroom

If I recall the classrooms at Melbourne Grammar, it seems that the desks were pitted with scars and minor troughs gouged by restless boys. Pocket knives were not in common use so the carving must have been done by keys? There were names on the desks, some of them written in ink, some of them cut by the point of a compass. A boy commented on the desks one day and Noel Austin, our classics master, told us that in Eton, Shrewsbury and similar schools in England you could find the names of Winston Churchill and others whose names he rattled off. I think everyone was as surprised as I was. These famous men had once sat, bored, in their desks as we did? I could see that it was possible; indeed, I supposed that it might have been likely. Why not?

I think of those names on the desks of my youth and I find myself linking them with the initials and/or nicknames written – sprayed – on modern walls, trains or their stations, and it seems that young people must make a statement of identity: it's an assertion, a claim, a protest, and, strangely enough – you may not accept this – it's an almost pitiful act of humility. A name on a desk, or a wall, doesn't make much difference. If that's the most you can do in this world, you're ready to be ignored. Similarly – I think there's a connection – the practice of initiation has almost disappeared. Initiation is another enemy of anonymity because the initiate has normally to state his name before he can gain acceptance, which is what he is said to crave. Initiation of course is forced on people and what do they do? The following year, they force initiation on those who come after. I speak of an aspect of education that's often ignored – the fact that it repeats itself, with every year's group having to jump through hoops that have been jumped through any number of times before.

Children learn the alphabet, they learn to read. They try to get the hang of numbers. They learn the ways of other children, and possibly someone will teach them how to swim. They'll play games and with any luck these will be so absorbing that they won't see any reason to

stop and go inside. I remember these things clearly from my own childhood, which seems closer as I grow older. I see myself at thirteen, running around the oval at Grimwade House, Melbourne Grammar's preparatory school, in a game of keepings-off. There is a tennis ball and it's thrown from one boy to another on the same side, pursued, because that's what the game's about, by boys from the 'other' side. We're all dressed in the same clothes and how we know which side each person's on I've no idea, but we do. If someone fumbles, or throws inaccurately, then one of the other side will grab the ball and the game will have swung their way. It'll be 'our' side that does the chasing and the hoping for a mistake. The ball soars in mighty arcs as those who throw best show off by hurling to someone on the other side of the field. Grimwade's clock looks down and time stands still. We run, we chase, we grasp the ball, and suddenly Stan, our housemaster, is on the sidelines, watching, perhaps as sorry as we are that the game must end, as end it must. Why? The clock doesn't care if we play all night ...

Who does care then? Yes, our mothers and fathers, our teachers, all those whose money or occupations make them part of the system we've entered on the day we passed through the principal's solemn door. There's a *reason* why we're here, and this game with the tennis ball, this joyous shouting to people on *our* side to throw the ball to us so we can throw it on again, is only an interruption, a little additive squeezed into our days ... but we are children, and we don't see it that way at all. We're on a level of energy and excitement which we think can go on forever, though it can't. Someone has to feed us, and someone has to see that we reach our beds, and rouse us in the morning to set the next day in motion. Days are endless when we're young, but time will run out and somewhere, somehow, we need to get some learning done before we're forced to take responsibility for ourselves.

What will we learn?

We will learn that we're members of the society represented by our parents and the other adults of our town, some of them pretty whacky

in our estimation. Jack Murdoch moves from models of the irrigation system to teaching us some songs, and we're told to sing 'Poems are made by fools like me/But only God can make a tree.' Few, if any, of us have thought of the trees around the place as having anything to do with God, but even that stupidity pales beside the insult to our intelligences in the earlier line. We change it when we sing. It becomes 'fools like you', and we laugh. Jack raps his knuckles on the table. 'You know the proper words,' he says. 'Sing them!' We do so, but half-heartedly. We don't think we're fools. What rot! Trees just *grow*, so why should God take credit? The humility of the person who wrote the poem is suspect, we think, and I at least am glad when the singing's over. It's a silly song because it doesn't ring true.

But there are so many things that don't ring true. There's a murderous war being fought to our north, yet the soldiers that pass through our town on trains are full of merriment, some of it coming out of frothy bottles they wave at the kids who go to the station to see what's passing through – sometimes guns, sometimes very ordinary men who may never come back. They wave and their faces seem full of elation, but what are those faces like when there are no people, only hundreds of miles of track passing through fields of wheat or sheep? What's on the soldiers' faces then? The songs on the radio won't tell us because they're not about truth, but about pushing a certain view of the war, which is We Will Win.

What about the Finley school, then; is it telling us the truth, or only what it thinks we're supposed to know? And the famous school in Melbourne, where my parents send me though they've hardly the money to do so? Can it be trusted, yes or no? The second question's easier than the first: the famous school can be trusted to look after the interests of the class, the section of the population, that it serves. But does it know what it's doing? Can its judgements be trusted? There's no guarantee. It must be foolish too, at times, though it's smarter than most schools in the land. You may wonder why I ask. Teachers are often surprised by the resistance of their students to what they're

supposed to be learning, but why shouldn't they resist? They're being made into social creatures. That's what knowledge does. They're being shaped, formed, and can't help but be aware. I think back to that long game of keepings-off at Grimwade, which had to end, though the grass would have stayed green for days and the hands on the clock would have moved patiently for years. Stan came out to call us in – showers, pajamas, bed. Another day, with other lessons, in the morning. The school's work, despite our wish to run and call to each other till the end of time, had to continue. Little boys had to turn into big boys, one day at a time, winning exhibitions and scholarships and taking their places in the world. That was what the school was for!

And who cared about Preston? Nobody much? The people of Preston cared as much about the school as they did for everything else in the society which put a low value on them, as they did on themselves. They thought life was hard and you had to get the better of it somehow. The school could show them Bill Lawry and Ron Barassi, but little else. The school put teachers in front of them and sometimes this did no more than enrage them. Here's something from a boy called Paul, naming some of his teachers:

(1) geat fucked pullen.
(2) geat fucked Eagle.
(3) geat fucked Moore.
(4) geat fucked, geat stuffed, geat routed, geat a dick in your ear, scott.

Dear Sir.
Paul is sick & he wants me to tell you to geat fucked.
Your Friend
Mrs C Doapy

Here's another scrap from the early Preston years:

Name Jim Chris Form 3H

JIM CHRIS

FROM

FORM 3H
To MR
TO MR LO

TO MR LOBB
MR LOBB YOU ARE A POOF AND A CUNT

TO MR LOOB
MR LOBB IS A POOF AND A CUNT?

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LOBB IS A POOF AND CUNT AND FUCKEN CUNT AND BULLSHIT ARTIST

? YOU BUM AND BUM

JIM CHRISTO

Jim Christo's piece had been typed. Paul's rage came out in black, swirly writing. There would be teachers, I imagine, who've not seen such expressions of impotent anger, but most teachers in my years in the northern suburbs would know about such things, if only by repute. Readers may wonder why I introduce them, but, as I said earlier in these pages, our failures teach us as much as our successes, and failure, that bottomless pit, is forever yawning for those who don't succeed. They have only to give way to despair and in they go, possibly to be redeemed in later years by forces not glimpsed in their youth, but not to be counted on, either. Once in the pit may be forever in the pit.

Preston sometimes did better. Here's a young woman's response to Peter Carey's story, 'American Dreams'.

"WE DON'T WANT TO KNOW WHAT WE ARE REALLY LIKE"

I look into the mirror; but I don't see me, that is if there is a me at all;
A REAL ME

I see a girl with black hair, freckles and an embedded frown mark between her eyes; she looks exactly like the picture on my

identification card. Her name is the same too. But I don't know her, she's a stranger to me.

SHE just stares at ME, as if begging me to acknowledge her existence and set her free from her locked room behind the mirror. But no ... I don't know or trust her enough to do that. In fact I don't even try, I just want to forget her. However, SHE'S ALWAYS THERE, perhaps that's why I dislike her so.

Usually, she makes me very angry because of the way she continuously follows me. I can see her from the corner of my eye as I pass by shop windows or even puddles, but mostly I try not to look at her. Often though I can't help it. I do want to know her but I am afraid, afraid of what the mirror girl is like once out of her suspension.

Most of the time as I pass by mirrors – if I'm brave – I steal a quick glance at the mirror girl; yes I'm curious, BUT after a second I always look away and try to put her out of my mind. However, the look on her face lingers around me like a constant reminder of myself. Finally, I look at her face for one, maybe two seconds, and the frown appears between her eyes; it fades slowly.

Once, I became furious with the mirror girl for the fear she induces in me; so I sat and stared at her for at least two minutes; she stared back at me. Then, as I saw the absurdity of this battle between me and the mirror girl, I laughed. The mirror girl laughed too, but the frown mark appeared between her eyes ... only this time it did not go.

That was a year 11 girl; here's something by a boy in year 10, from about the same time as the pieces by Paul and Jim Chris that I rescued from their desks at the end of some dismal period when those two boys were not, *pace* Fol Morgan, having a very spiritual time at school.

"TOMORROW WE MAY BE FREE"

Once in a hot desert there lived a tribe of Africans who used to hunt their food and the rest of the time were content to laze around basking in the sun.

But one day the tribe saw a strange sight, it was a man. But the man was not the same colour as the dark Africans instead he was a pale white. He was dressed in strange clothes and he held a box under his arm which made a strange clicking sound. The man spoke to them and told them there was something in the ground that the men wanted so he bought the land off the Africans for some nice shiny beads.

“You can come back to civilization with us” said the man. “We’ll free you from your endless hunting, you won’t have to go hungry any more, there will always be food.” The village elders liked the idea of free food so they decided that the tribe would go with the man.

“You won’t be sorry,” said the man.

The sight of the large buildings and cars stunned the natives and they were frightened, but they could not return to their land because it was sold. They were taken to a place where people get houses to live in. “You are free to live in any house you want,” he stated, “as long as you can pay for it.” But the tribe couldn’t pay for it because all they had was what they were wearing. So they were put in an old crumbly boarding house where they were free to do what they liked, provided, of course, they didn’t disturb the neighbours.

And there they stayed until one day a man in a dark suit came to talk with the middle aged men of the tribe. He said, “You must get a job, you are free to have any job you want provided you have the right qualifications.”

But the tribesmen did not have the right qualifications, they were only hunters. So they went to work on the roads working for a few dollars a week. The tribe had moved to a new area and they still owed money from the houses that they had bought, they owed money for the clothes they had bought, and also owed money to the Government because their children were going to school getting “free” education.

One night the tribes elders got together and wondered what they could do. None of them were happy and they couldn’t go back to the bush because they had been in civilization so long they had forgotten how to live off the land. The only thing left for them to do was to steal.

So the men tried breaking into houses and the women and children went shoplifting. But the Africans who weren't good thieves anyway were soon caught and after the judge pronounced sentence he said to them "I don't understand you people, we give you a chance to live a free life in society and you ruin it for yourself."

MORAL: THE WORST KIND OF FREEDOM IS FREEDOM FROM FREEDOM.

I'm not sure how this will strike you. I should say of the last piece that it was written after I'd been reading my students some of James Thurber's *Fables for Our Time* and *Further Fables for Our Time*. The students saw very quickly how Thurber had adapted the sort of folk tales they'd heard or read themselves to give expression to a personal vision; many of them found his approach easy to imitate, and, to my delight, there were some ingenious and witty Thurber-derivations written. One of the most difficult, troubling, problems for a writer is to find his/her own voice. Offering Thurber as a model solved that problem for my students, and they wrote freely and easily. I remembered how I'd started my career in Bairnsdale thinking I'd show my students a few points about style. Style! Tell that to Jim Christo, or to Paul, son of Mrs Doapy! But throwing students into the pond called style, and letting them sink or swim – that was another matter.

I had long been an admirer of George Orwell. I went searching through his books for passages I wanted my students to consider, then I had them printed with the punctuation removed. Words, words, words. I passed these pages around to my students, and told them to watch – 'read' – carefully while I read the same passage to them from the printed book. I read each passage slowly, emphasizing the shape of the sentences, as indicated by Orwell's punctuation. Then I put the book down, and took up the sheet I'd given the students. 'Get the sentences first,' I told them. 'Put in the full stops, then punctuate each sentence in the way that makes it easiest to follow. To understand.' They'd work on it and so would I. After a time I'd put my own exercise in front of me and take up the printed book again, and tell

them how Orwell, generally regarded as a master with the language, had punctuated for himself. The students often did quite well, but just as often they were all over the place. The amusing thing, for them and for me, was that I, despite my familiarity with the originals, could never punctuate in quite the way that Orwell did. ‘Punctuation,’ I used to tell them, ‘is not entirely a matter of right and wrong. There’s a personal element in it.’ I suppose I had to say that, since I couldn’t get my Orwell right, but the students didn’t seem to expect perfection from me, which was just as well, since there were places where I couldn’t really tell why Orwell had punctuated as he had ... but there it was, his marks were as they were; at about the same time I bought for my son an edition of *1984* in a photocopy of Orwell’s manuscript, with alterations and revisions in his own hand. It was the sort of thing I’d like my students to have had, but was far too expensive for them to buy, or the college to buy, for that matter. I’d love to have had a vast store of resources for the study of writing but, like all my colleagues, I made do with photocopies of things taken from books, magazines, even the morning’s paper. We developed a very contemporary frame of reference for the teaching of our TAFE programs and I think that was a virtue in the students’ minds.

Why? The question makes me think about the students I encountered in Preston over twenty years, from Jim Christo and Paul to Chris Strover, Nadine and all the others who lifted our sights when we thought about them. Preston students didn’t want to be where they were. They were ready to move if they could. Some of them had backgrounds that limited them, and they knew it. Others were comfortable enough but they had nothing behind them, pushing, or drawing them forward as if that was their natural direction. Such tradition as the area possessed was like a weight around the legs, dragging people back, or down. If you named Preston or any of the suburbs around it as where you came from, nobody would be impressed. No store of respect or goodwill had ever been built to support the place. I began to take my students on walking tours of

places it might help them to understand. We began with Collingwood, because it was near, and because it had lifted itself out of being a slum, via the possession of a famous football team. Collingwood existed on flattish land near the Yarra, and it was overlooked by the nearby hill of Kew, where the Roman Catholic Archbishop lived in 'Raheen'. Frank Hardy had written his famous 'Power Without Glory' about a son of Collingwood, John Wren, who'd fought his way up, via crime and thuggery, to a home not far from the Archbishop's: the two of them, in that mysterious world of Catholics, found an alliance of some sort.

Yet Collingwood had changed, and I wanted my students to see what was new, and what remained. We caught a train, and we walked about for a couple of hours. They could see how tiny the holdings were; Preston was superior in that. They could see renovations, and attics being built to give an extra room or two. They could see remnants of old-fashioned working class respectability, like brightly polished brass names of houses, or knockers on front doors; and they could see that newcomers obeyed another set of aesthetic commands, mostly issued by hardware stores via TV ads. There were cars crowding the streets as affluence pushed its way into the lanes where floodwaters had once taken days to drain away. The people who play football for Collingwood now, I told my students, don't come from the area any more. The days when the black and white teams were feared because they played with a frenzied belief in themselves as the only thing keeping despair at bay were far behind. Collingwood had changed from a social reality to an idea. The name no longer referred simply to a place but a construct of the culture; Collingwood was something they carried around in their heads. They could see this because their own suburb, a little way to the north, had absorbed this unconsciously, knowing without realising, if I may put it that way.

Then I took them to East Melbourne, a little further down the line. Again, the blocks were small, but not so tiny, and the homes, many of them well-preserved, belonged to people who had pride in themselves. There were a few big blocks with grander homes than Collingwood

could display, and my students could see that although East Melbourne was a much nicer place than Collingwood, it had taken shape in the same period. The ideas, the forces of a period, I told my students, manifest themselves in many forms and many directions: to know a period or an historical movement, we have first to gather together and then to reconcile those different manifestations, and at the same time we have to recognize new forces breaking in. I showed them a spot in a corner of a park where I had heard Arthur Calwell, later Leader of the Opposition, giving a speech. This was before television, I explained, as if I belonged to a world so strange that I could have told them anything. They liked East Melbourne, but when I took them through Toorak, they were resistant. Stiff. Impressed, but unwilling to say so. I pointed out that wealthy people encouraged trees, and allowed them to grow. My point about Preston was obvious. The huge trees of Toorak would never have been planted, would have been lopped if they had been planted, and would have been taken out by Council or by neighbourly disputation if they'd ever grown as big as they were allowed to do in Toorak. 'Look at Heyington Station,' I told my students, pointing it out: 'See how discreetly it's tucked away? Compare that with Saint Georges Road. People shape the world around them in accordance with their ideas of themselves. The confident make a strong, confident world ...'

That was a sentence I let my students finish for themselves. They knew very well where that sort of thought would lead. By now I'd begun to like my students sufficiently to take their side. I realised this at an unusual place. Bell Street, one of the city's traffic rivers, joins hilly Heidelberg in the east with Preston, then goes on a couple of suburbs further till it runs into the stretches of the city reaching north-west. I drove to work along Bell Street and home again. It became a habit of mine to fill up with petrol at a tyre depot where I was served, as often as not, by a powerfully built young man who struck me as having a strong mind, but a truncated education. He was curious about me, and asked me questions. I answered him freely, always. He said little in

return, but I knew he was listening. I felt I represented for him one of those outsiders who think they know. Confident bastards whom the locals can never find a way to pull down, thus proving, all over again, that it was outsiders who had their hands on the levers of control while locals could do little but obey. Resentment ran deep in this strongly built man but he was too wary to let it show. He told me one day that he fancied the idea of moving to the eastern suburbs. He'd been out there lately, and they had it better than he did, here. I told him I was happy to live in the north of Melbourne, and that the eastern suburbs lacked a lot of the spirit that was strong, if suppressed, where he lived and I worked. By then our tertiary orientation programs were highly sought-after, so I could afford to be a little smug. He filled my tank, hung up the hose, then screwed the cap back on, doing these things deliberately, as if they were part of the statement he was going to make. I gave him my twenty dollars, and he stood with the note in his hand, staring across the traffic. 'All the same, I reckon that'd be a good place to live.'

He meant anything would be better than Preston. He wanted out. I knew that we'd reached the end of one of our conversational strands. Getting out was what Preston people wanted. There were no worthwhile ladders in their suburb, no rungs to climb, one by one. You couldn't get anywhere, you couldn't succeed at anything worthwhile. I couldn't argue. I got in every day, and out again; that was why I was stopping where this man worked. The car that brought me to him and took me away again was a proof, a basis, underlying what he saw as the betterment of getting out. It seemed to me that even if he moved to an eastern suburb he'd be working in a garage or something of the sort, so he'd be no better off, but he, I knew, saw it differently. If he got out, he'd have got out! He'd have a chance, whatever the chances were in the place where he'd arrived. The programs I was in charge of at the college, preparing people for tertiary study, were successful because of this urge to get out, to make something of themselves, which was in our students every bit as much as in the man who served

me petrol. I'm sure, also, that he would have thought he was more honest, because more realistic, than I was. Preston people *knew* that other places were better. I would have answered that what mattered was not the place, so much, as the *level* on which a person operated in the broader society, but my petrol man, watching Bell Street passing him every hour of his working life, wouldn't let himself be distracted by irrelevancies like that. *Everyone* in Preston was on a lower level, even if they deceived themselves into thinking they weren't. I decided, after a time, that my petrol man was right. He'd intuitively expressed the classic problem of the refugee – I'm in a place I don't like, I want to get somewhere better. Counter-argument: shouldn't you stay where you are and make it better for everyone? Answer: Stuff *everyone*, I want to be somewhere better. Counter-argument: That means the bad places get worse and the better ones get overloaded with people pushing to get in: what's the good of that? Answer: I've only got one life and I want it to be better than it is. Out of my way!

When I'd first gone to Preston I'd observed that it wasn't a badly built suburb. If only it had more trees! Gardens! Trees and gardens, I'd come to realise, are the products of hope. If people are happy where they are, they'll make things flourish. They'll build on the buildings and change the quality of the air, the atmosphere, around them. Gardens link; they draw people outdoors, they invite people to step into the world around them, leaving their personal concerns, such as they may be, inside, locked away for a time. Streams of traffic like Bell Street are not part of this. They're mobility, whereas gardens are places of rest, repose, creation ... and Preston had very few gardens of note. This inability, deficiency, was at the heart of its psyche, and the young man who served me petrol, and listened to me, grudgingly, answering his grumbles, felt his years were slipping away and life's chances, its possibilities, were vanishing.

**S**o I came in to do good, I did it, I went home, I worked hard, I had strong bonds with the students, of whom I had become very fond by

the time of the tertiary preparation years, but I had a life apart. By the time I retired from education (1987), I'd published eight books. Very few of those I dealt with had any notion that these books existed. When I was approaching retirement I made it my business to thank a number of people for help they'd given me. One of them was John Wade, who headed the Victorian Universities Admissions Committee; John had given me access to his organisation's print-outs, which meant I had been able to keep track of our students' success or otherwise, and the marks needed to get into the various courses. I had used this information to keep my colleagues' efforts focussed; John asked me what I was going to do in my retirement. 'At last I'll have as much time as I want to write,' I told him. 'Write? What do you write?' he wanted to know. I saw in a flash that if you lead a double life you're unlikely to succeed in either. In the world of education I was at a level where it was expected that people might have hobbies but not another life altogether, and in the world of publishing I was producing books but never had the time, interest or energy to become a public figure, quoted, visible, offering opinions via microphones to seated listeners. I was in between, doing both, well enough in my view, but not making any mark. It occurred to me that all the things I'd worked in had disappeared. I'd taught in technical schools: they'd disappeared. I'd taught in tertiary orientation programs: they'd disappeared. I'd worked in the development of the new Victorian Certificate of Education: it was changing every year and a decade after I'd retired it was unrecognisable. It seemed to me that anyone who put their faith in systems to embody what they'd stood for had invested faith in insecurity, and was bound to have that faith torn away. Looking back on three decades of working in public education, I can point to no achievement I can claim as my own. I don't think I could point to any two bricks, still stuck together, which were once part of a home, or even a wall, a fence, which was built by me. If I want to show you anything I would claim as an achievement, I would have to take you into a classroom, somewhere, and show you what it was that I did, all those years ago ...

My first classroom is an outdoors one already mentioned, a walk with my Australian Society students through Toorak, Melbourne's wealthiest district. The place unsettled my group. Modern apartments, right on the street, had verve, an air of glamour, while older homes, in huge grounds scattered with trees almost hiding the buildings, gave my students a feeling that they weren't wanted. Before we set off I had issued a warning: 'You're there to look. Be aware of your impressions. Look for detail, and take notice of what you see. Whether you like it or not, record it in your minds. I'm going to ask you to analyse what you see, so you'd better make sure you have a careful look.'

That was me. Somewhere about halfway through our walk, I came on some of my group laughing at ... what shall I call it? A letter box? No. Toorak is such a self-contained sort of place that it's light on for street furniture, such as telephone boxes, letter boxes and the like. However, an earlier incarnation of what is now Australia Post had embedded on a street corner a round, domed metal object with a slit into which residents could push letters. It was painted red. Trevor, the oldest of the group, a young man who wrote insightfully on every matter we dealt with, was pointing out that, moulded in the cast iron directly above the postal slot, were the words 'RECEIVING PILLAR'. He was amused and the others, taking their lead from him, were laughing too. 'They couldn't call it a letter box,' Trevor was saying to his friends, 'that'd be too simple. Too much like everyone else. No, that wouldn't do for ...' he made his voice sound toff-ish ... 'Toorak!' Everyone laughed. Toorak! Preston wasn't letting it get away with that!

I was caught on the hop. I was almost certain that the same words would be found on such things wherever they might be encountered, but then again, I wasn't sure. I looked at Trevor and his friends, uncertainty on my brow. They, feeling sure enough, were laughing, and it was infectious. I said, 'I'm not sure that that's a special Toorak postbox, you know, but I'd better check before I say something wrong.' I led the party down the street lined with enormous trees. It had to

be a statewide, perhaps nationwide phenomenon. Toorak wouldn't have had special pillars cast for itself alone? I checked, I asked a few questions, and the following week I assured my group that, much as they'd been amused by the words on the thing, 'receiving pillar' was not an example of Toorak being up itself, as they'd thought, but an example of the stiff, authoritarian formality of an earlier time. My students accepted this, as far as I could see, but nothing could take back the amusement they'd expressed when they thought they'd caught Toorak out, looking down its nose at common folk!

I was still teaching in Bairnsdale, but it was my last year. I had nine boys in my year 12 English class. I knew quite a bit about them because most had come through the school, though a couple had switched from the High School. As the year drew on I invited them to lunch at my house, at the western edge of town. To transport them I borrowed a station wagon from a colleague, my VW being too small. They met my wife, we lunched, we got back in the borrowed car. Driving along Main Street we passed the shop of a man I knew whose wife had died. Rumours were circulating about this man and his daughter. The daughter was standing in the street as we drove past, not far from the family's shop. The things I'd heard were no more than whispers, I hadn't the faintest idea of whether or not they were true, but I did notice something about the way she was standing, as if presenting herself for observation, perhaps for the selection of some passer-by. What I am describing was purely intuitive, but it was in accord with what I'd heard. I drove on, my eyes, now, straight ahead.

At the moment I took my eyes off this young woman I sensed that each and every one of my year 12 boys was looking at her, appraising. Sexual availability can't be disguised from males of that age. The whispers that I'd heard had reached them as well. Country towns! It's almost impossible to make a life because everyone around you is fabricating as hard and as imaginatively as they know how. A couple of years earlier I'd stopped my car to buy a few things at the West End

store. I tossed my purchases in the car and for some reason I walked onto the lawn that divided the highway's two streams. It was the end of the day, traffic was light, but after years in Bairnsdale I knew that one was never out of sight. To my surprise I saw a young woman walking in my direction, being pulled, one might say, by a dog on a leash. I knew her through a friend, and spoke to her briefly. I knew also, via the endless vine of whispering, why she was on the street with her dog. The animal was a statement to the world that she was giving her pet a walk, when in fact she was looking for bodily business. I chatted as affably as I could, but I was keen to get on my way, as, probably, was she. She could see she wouldn't be doing business with me. *I* could see that that wouldn't stop the minds of anybody observing us from drawing the sort of conclusions that suited their minds. I began to wonder how much longer I would stay in that town. I married, my wife wanted to move, we moved. I was pleased to go. It wasn't easy being a teacher when your whole life was under observation. The town, the district, the region, was a network of whispered observations, speculations, surmises ... it was endless, inescapable. The things that were being said about one were rarely brought into the open to be answered, proved or disproved. If you were being discussed, it shaded your life, whether you knew it or not.

**I** was a teacher of English; that was what I told people when they asked me what I did. I was also a teacher of Social Studies, though I never knew what the words meant. 'Social Studies' was a mean, vacuous term, but it made a mighty claim as well. One was teaching the young how they should view their society. *That* sounds simple! I'd better say at once that I never knew how to do this, though I made some valiant attempts. Language, though, I thought, was easy. One taught the young how to use it correctly, and well. Their mistakes, their mis-usages, were obvious, countless, endless, and everywhere. I thought it was up to me to teach them to do better. I tried very hard, I truly did.

Teaching a language, even one's own, is not easy. The difficulty lies not in what I shall call the *largesse* of language, that is the emotional sweep, for most people enjoy preposterous oaths, declarations of love or hate, the rhetoric of great causes, including war, but – *but!* – the details which make it flow, or prevent it from flowing, are another matter. If you have never confused *there, their* and *they're*, you were never in any of my classes. Do you use *its* and *it's* correctly? Are you sound, and sure, with who and whom? Don't be alarmed, dear reader, I won't go on. There's no need to put the book down, unless you have an appointment with someone more interesting. I promise no spelling tests!

At the bottom of what I want to say is the question of how much the language we use is ours, and how much it's an imposition from the past. Ordinary people, glancing at newspapers, picking up phones or talking in the street, wouldn't bother themselves with my question. The words in their mouths are the words in their minds, and they're theirs! Everybody speaks, or they think they speak, the language of today. New words, new sayings, are being invented all the time and everybody wants to use them. There's nothing wrong in that because language, like most things, needs to renew itself. But where did it come from?

This is a question I never attempted to answer in my years of teaching, because I didn't have the faintest idea. Not being a linguist, I'm deaf to such scholarship as may exist in this area. Perhaps I can explain what puzzles me by turning to Latin, which I studied for four years at school. Some readers will know, and many won't, that Latin is a language in which the word endings are all-important. Nouns change their endings according to their *case*; verbs, too, have a variety of endings, according to their person and tense. We were told as boys that it was an *inflected* language; I recall that I drew some comfort from this word. If someone could apply adjectives of the sort to the puzzling language we were learning then someone must *know*, and that was a relief. Inflected: what did that mean? It meant that the word

endings told you how the word, in the form you saw it in, fitted into the grammatical movement of the sentence. And now I feel another stirring in myself, as if I should apologise for mentioning grammar. The English-speaking part of the world has been moving away from the concept of grammar for much of my lifetime, and I'm not sure why. This process is helped by the fact that such grammar as English possesses is nowhere near so obvious, or unrelenting, as the grammar in a language like Latin. One can converse, chatter, or generally get by, without thinking of English grammar. One does it by imitating the speech forms of those who speak confidently. One can also keep one's statements simple so that no confusion sneaks in through misuse of larger, longer, forms. It's not hard!

I have already mentioned, in an earlier section, having a cupboard full of exercises designed to teach my students correct usage in a range of matters. The poor things spent hours working on these exercises and correcting them from other sheets in the same copious cupboard. What good did it do? The Ross Bros truck answered that. I dare say I taught a certain diligent obedience but grammar, that is, the formalities involved in putting words together, was a concept that remained foreign to virtually all of my students, the only exceptions being those who had picked up the mysteriously beneficial concept long before they came to me. Much the same could be said of my students' spelling. Some did it correctly with a natural flair, some managed fairly well, some were hopelessly confused, and one – Noel Mays, of Lakes Entrance - was both perfect and shocking at the same time. When Noel wrote, one would have been hard put to find a single word spelt according to form, but, it dawned on me after a time, that was the shortcoming of the language he, like me, was using. Noel didn't read much, so when he wrote, he wrote down the sounds he heard. Once you accepted that his spelling was a transcript of his hearing, and not an imitation of dictionary-derived words, he was near enough to perfect. His hearing was excellent. I had Noel in my class at a time when I was interested in Gippsland's mining history and I can tell you I thought he was a rare

nugget! He left as soon as he reached the leaving age and, as I have said many times already, and sadly, I never saw him again. I wonder if he ever realised how rare, and wonderful, he was?

It dawned on me, at some stage in my early years of teaching, that language was two things, related of course, but detachable too: it was the sounds we made to connect with others, and vice-versa, and it was the written form of our thinking. Writing was linked, of course, to reading, but the two might be separated by a long stretch of time. It's almost four centuries since Shakespeare left this world, but his thoughts are still alive. Spoken English is more direct. Responses are expected to be immediate. (Soldiers are expected to spring to attention, to salute, turn their eyes right, and so on, at the instant of command.) Spoken English can be as formally complex as written English, but generally isn't. Complexities, especially those dealing with the intricacies of law or philosophy, are normally put into writing. School students, however, are generally treated as if one is as easy as the other.

Am I being unjust to teachers here? Let me go back to my earlier statement about language as an imposition of the past. If it's an imposition, it's also a gift, and nobody knows where it came from. You may take me to task for saying this, pointing out how this and that invasion of the British isles brought these and those changes. This I understand. But who, and where and when, decided – and I know this is nonsense; there was never any decision – that English verbs could place English speakers, and listeners, in the range of relationships to time made possible by the tenses available to users of those verbs? Consider these constructions:

> If *I had been eaten* by those cannibals, you and I would never have met.
>
> *I will not have eaten* by the time you arrive, so you and I can have something together.

Silly stuff, you may say, but English verbs allow a range of moments in the rush of time where the writer/speaker may place herself. The verbs

may then be interrogative or affirmative, active or passive, positive or negative (I will, I won't), and so on. The inflecting, in English, is done largely via the verbs:

He *would* have ...

He *should* have ...

He *could* have ...

And so on. The trouble with teaching these things is that the more you concentrate on them, the harder it gets for students, who will babble or scribble along quite happily until they have to think about what they do. What's right, what's wrong. They get nervous, shaky, and write things that are silly, or awful. They're better when they're natural. Years ago I was teaching *Macbeth* to a year 10 group and I found myself seized by something Macbeth says to his wife when he's waiting for the news of Banquo's death to reach their castle:

Light thickens, and the crow makes wing to the rooky wood:

I remember reading the words to my students, pausing, then saying them again. How could Shakespeare make simple words so ominous? The fact was, he'd done it, and any of us might do it, if suddenly possessed of an insight. One of my year 10 boys wrote in an essay, 'Parents, your task for us is almost done.' Three years passed, I'd left the area where I taught him, then I heard that he'd given up his engineering course because he'd been found to have cancer and was too weak to continue. He was going home to die, and he did. His parents supported him in his last months, I wrote to them, his mother wrote back. I had known him, she had borne him, we shared a little of his fading memory. I put his words near the end of my first book, I remember him now. He lives, for me, in those words: 'Parents, your task for us is almost done.' He didn't know how wrong those words were going to prove, for himself, yet how true for any number of others. It's a statement that every young person should be able to make, but it's a statement that life or death can overthrow. Requiescat in pace, Edward Beane.

Latin's said toe be a dead language, but it comes to life on my blackboard one day when I am introducing my students to the poems of Wilfred Owen. I read them 'Dulce et decorum est', and I write the Latin words on my board, still black when it isn't grey with dust:

DULCE ET DECORUM EST, PRO PATRIA MORI

We read the poem. Owen makes mori rhyme with glory. I've written the Latin in white; the translation I write in a middling shade of blue:

Sweet/and/fitting/it is/for/one's country (fatherland)/to die.

Owen says this is a lie, but the town has memorials, and Anzac Day services, that say much the same thing. There are memorials all across the country, even in hamlets almost deserted today, to men who couldn't find it in themselves to say that their daily lives were more important than loyalty to supposedly greater or higher causes. Off they went, to be wounded, killed, or changed. Impulses they scarcely understood caused them to go away, and the impulses were excited in them by words ...

Words, words, words. I'm a teacher, and I do my best to make my students aware of words, the powers they have, the ways to manage them, the improvement in one's expression when those words are well sequenced or developed. This is the thing I do best, and it seems to me to be the thing most worth doing. Those who can't manage words are managed by words, and this is just as true in an age of advertising as it was in an age of empire. You must control or be controlled, and I want autonomy for my students, and to get it they must be able to manage words.

Or so I say, but what would I know?

I borrow some money from my father, I buy a house. I marry, my wife and I have a child, we sell the house and move to Melbourne. The people who buy the house say they love the trees I've planted in the garden. A couple of years later my wife and I drive past what used to be our home, and the trees aren't there any more. I'm a little put out, but I can't do anything, and I'm already planting trees at our new

house, so something has been maintained. What did Shakespeare have to say about trees? Lots of things no doubt.

Teaching in the city is different. This is easy to say, but what's the difference? I've already said how I miss the mountains on the horizon, the rivers running to the lakes, and the boundary of sea, roaring on windy nights against the sand. I come from a farming family, I'm used to the land, I feel that important things aren't visible in urban life. What do I mean? Ultimately, I think, it's the sense of generations succeeding each other, obvious enough in country towns, where you've only to visit the cemetery to find names you know from your own generation on headstones erected fifty, eighty years before. The children going into primary schools are continuations, and there's no putting that thought aside, however captivating they may be if you stop to watch them. Urban life, on the other hand, puts a great deal out of sight – the elderly in nursing homes, the sick in hospitals, criminals in jail. All are dealt with so that those whose lives are thought to be central can function with minimal interruption. Or so it's supposed to be. One can live a life without being brought face to face with the effects it has on those who contribute to it, perhaps, but with less benefit. It's possible to think one's life is normal when it may be privileged indeed.

In my early years at Preston I sometimes walk up to High Street if I have a spare hour, and sit in the back of the magistrate's court. The cases depress me. The magistrates are impartial enough, and the police are impersonal, but the young men brought to face charges are so palpably in the wrong and confused that 'justice' can be swift – and scornful. The magistrates hit these young offenders hard, intending to frighten them so they don't come back. It's obvious to me that if petty criminals aren't shown another road they'll keep to the one they're on. This means that their second sentence will be tougher than the first, and the third will be harder again. Justice! I have a class called 3GH one year, for English. They're an interesting if maddening group. They're a ferment of talk and restless interaction. They're talking to each other

flat out, all the time. They can't concentrate. You pose a problem and it interests them for a moment, then they lose it. They start chattering to whoever's a friend that day, close to them or on the other side of the room. They have no sense of themselves as a group, with a destiny, or perhaps they have, and they hope that ceaseless energy will block what's coming over the horizon. I decide that the only way to steady them is to take them walking, observing, and then writing about what they've seen. I do this. I take them on many excursions – to a carpet factory, Preston cemetery, into the city. They like to do these things, though it doesn't make them any more settled. As we move about, my eyes flicker like those of a prison warder; I'm counting. Everybody here? Anybody lost? I want them to ask themselves where they'll fit in when their schooling's behind them, and then to ask what they'll need to hold themselves out of trouble. It would be nice if they could succeed at something but that might be too much to ask. They are hormonally over-active, so perhaps they're a case for that form of education that suggests that males of a certain age should be let loose in the wild and forced to find out how to cope. They, on the other hand, find security of a sort in being together. I don't lose anybody on our walks, though I'm fearful that I will. They're interested in the cemetery. It affects them. They read the words on headstones and they rush about pointing out inscriptions to each other.

An incident occurs. We've been at the cemetery for an hour, and they've gathered in one corner, for no particular reason. They're standing, although I don't think they realise it, close to the tiny grave of a child who died at two years and eleven months. Set in the grave is a tile that used to hang on the boy's bedroom door. He was, when he died, the exact age that my son is at the time of this excursion. I'm affected, therefore, and ask the boys to move away. They do so, affably enough, and then they see some quaint inscription that amuses them. They laugh. A woman who is standing outside the cemetery fence becomes enraged. She shrieks at them. They have no idea what she's going on about. Neither have I. They stop laughing and look at her.

She rages on. I step toward the fence, telling her I'm in charge of the group and asking what her concern is. She says she's the mother of the child whose grave they've been laughing at. I assure her that their laughter has some other cause entirely. She doesn't believe me but my intervention has at least stopped her from yelling at the boys, who are watching their teacher and this unbelievable woman. I appease the mother by telling her how affected I myself was by the grave, and I tell her the age of my own son – exactly the age her boy was when he died. This calms her a little, and she is mollified when I tell her that it's time I took my group back to the school where they belong.

Teachers have sometimes to mouth the most awful lies. The boys don't 'belong' at their school. That's why I take them out. I get them to write about these excursions the following day, and they make an effort of sorts to say what they saw and felt. Oddly enough, I don't remember any of them mentioning the angry mother in their accounts of the cemetery visit. I think this is because, before I get them to write, I explain to them why she was so distraught. She thought they were laughing at her son's grave. I assure the boys that I assured the mother that this wasn't so. I mention my own son's age by way of explaining her feelings. They are unusually subdued on this point and, I think, they are satisfied that justice has been done on their behalf. She was wronging them, but their innocence has been asserted. They write, and their efforts are pathetic enough, but I count the expedition a success because for once they've been forced to think about something outside the strange, defensive construct which their social interaction – endlessly active and hellishly noisy – puts around them to protect them. The world which will sweep them apart, and use them brutally, has been kept at bay a little longer.

I think that in my Gippsland years, I saw education as helping those who accept it to embrace the world with understanding. I've already linked this, several times, to the unity I perceived in the landscape, and the place, humbly occupied, by humans within it. This, as I've

said more than once, disappeared when I got to the northern suburbs, when society as struggle came to the forefront of my mind. Education became a defence, a protection, a mechanism to help people both protect themselves, and advance. My Preston students knew that any advance was made in competition with others; most of society couldn't be seen, and that was where your competitors were, getting ready to do you dirty. They were a sceptical, scornful lot, and in some way I linked my struggle to serve them well with their own struggle to make a life for themselves. Gippsland had been a poor region, but there had still been families whose role in opening up the place and bringing it into modern times by sheer hard work made them venerated: nothing like this occurred in Preston. The place had dehistoricised itself, or allowed itself to be left out of official histories. Nothing had ever happened there. Apart from those two famous sportsmen, none of its sons and daughters could be pointed to as having shown the way. They may have been too affluent to be called a proletariat, but they were certainly, in my eyes, *lumpen*. In my early years in the area, I was teaching a year 11 group about the war in Vietnam. They were all boys and they would face the birthday ballot to be conscripted before too long. I'd seen Bairnsdale boys sent off to fight the Viet Cong and hadn't liked it at all. I'd read quite a lot about the conflict and wanted to give my students a background, a framework, so that they could argue the rights and wrongs of the fighting. Then a strange thing happened. I turned to put some notes on the blackboard and I heard a loud, rhythmic grunting behind me. I looked, and there was silence. I turned to write and the grunting broke out again. I looked again and there was silence again. I wrote some more notes, and the grunting restarted. This time, when I turned around, I knew the grunter was Terry, two desks from where I stood. I sat on the desk in front of him and asked the group – I knew it was only Terry, though I sensed that he was trying to lead everybody into a grunting fit – not to make noises but to confront what I was setting before them. 'You'll be in this war in a couple of years,' I told them, 'if certain sections of our society get

their way. You'll be fighting the Viet Cong, except you won't be able to tell them from the Viet anything else. You may decide to resist being conscripted, and if you do go on the run, people will ask you what you've got against the war. You'll need to know, because otherwise people will say that any young man who doesn't fight when his country wants him to is gutless.' I was saying this to the whole class, but Terry knew I was saying it to him. I'd met his parents a couple of weeks before at a parent-teacher night and I'd found his mother charming and his father, a big fellow, the sort of intelligent, decent man that Terry would surely become. But the little – or rather big – young bastard was trying to wreck my class. I pointed out that I could be teaching them the ins and outs of the voting system in Guatemala, in which case they'd have every right to be bored, but I was getting rid of their ignorance about the central issue of their generation, and the way our country was dealing with it. What more could I do than that?

It stopped Terry grunting, so I suppose I had my win, but I also felt that the rest of the group had already seen the relevance of teaching about Vietnam and was accepting it as I'd intended. I didn't need to lecture them, they were taking notes, so why get upset about one person playing the fool?

This question makes me pause. I think my counter-attack on Terry, for that was what it was, was driven by desperation. I had nothing but a passion directed against hysterical American war-making, and a modest amount of knowledge from books. I could justify what I was saying but would anyone take any notice? Most of them, yes: Terry, no. Why was he trying to destroy my class? I had no idea. Did he think it was subversive? If so, he was right, though I tried to be balanced. What would have happened if he'd persuaded the others to join him, grunting? I suppose I'd have walked out in disgust, and I don't think I would have been able to force myself back. The school didn't have any resources, I wasn't able to play them tapes of speeches, or show documentary films about the conflict. I was on my own, as so often at Preston, and, as so often, it was him or me. Terry shut up, I got

going again, and the period ended calmly, but things had been on the brink for a moment, and I'd been able to reclaim what was properly my own. Teachers are never very far from being destroyed. Why did Terry grunt? I think it was because he didn't want to be brought to face the implications of what I was getting them to write in their notes. He wanted to be irresponsible, a child, for another year or two ... after which, if the conscription lottery so decided, he'd have been able to immerse himself in our soldier tradition, complete with marches, homecomings, sad departures, ritualised burials, rigid salutes and all the rest of it, something to which my response was Let's Forget.

**P**reston TAFE had a council. I never knew who was on it. The minutes of its meetings were available from the director's secretary. I never heard of anyone reading them. If the council argued against anything, or resisted the director, I never heard of it. I attended heads of department meetings at which the director chatted about developments in such a way as to suggest that if he had our full support – as he had had so many times in the past – all would probably be well. I felt he was bringing ghosts over the horizon as threats in order to keep us grouped behind him. I felt he was always looking for opportunities to needle humanities, but that may have been because he thought it was always needling him. My department contained at one time a gifted drama teacher, called Norman Price. He felt frustrated because he didn't so much want a regular cycle of classes as production opportunities. He went to the director's office on an impulse one afternoon and outlined the plans, the dreams, that filled his mind. Half an hour later the director came to see me. He'd decided to make drama a separate department, as of that moment. I recall no reference to the new department's budget, its scope or anything else. Norman wanted out and Norman had been given what he wanted. I made no protest. By and large I thought it better if drama was a separate department, and as to the proprieties of its separation without so much as a comment from me, I'd learned not to waste my time. Drama

moved. But not far away. To, in fact, one of the wings that surrounded the old assembly yard, the prison yard, of the earlier technical school. Norman put on a couple of brilliant productions, then left. Someone else took over. Then our director decided that a TAFE college needed a learning resource centre, and commissioned architects. They joined the heads of department for a series of briefings on what the departments expected, or was it hoped, from the new resource. (There! The jargon has broken into my prose!) Various people outlined the usefulness of types of sound, recording and/or lighting equipment, and I saw my chance. There was a proposal for a meeting hall of reasonable, if modest, scale, and I suggested that if the audio and visual equipment was located around this central space, it would be available for drama productions. The college would be able to present, not only to itself, but to outsiders, the fruits of its drama work. Norman's replacements had done remarkably well with their miserable facilities and I wanted them to have a setting for showing the region what it had it in itself to produce. The architects listened, but asked no questions. The director beamed, but I wondered what he'd say in private. This I could guess from the building that was erected. There was no space for drama productions and the audio-visual department was more notable for its girly pictures than for anything else. In my earlier days I'd dreamed of a statewide set of framing policies, but they'd never arrived, and TAFE wasn't any better. Frustrated as I felt, it was hard to fix blame. I was frequently furious with my director, but the central TAFE office didn't seem to provide much direction. It expanded or contracted according to the political winds that blew. As chance would have it, I was in the central TAFE office on the afternoon that TAFE's chief officer called a meeting. He announced that he'd had a difference of opinion with the minister, and had tendered his resignation. Some difference! Nobody I spoke to knew quite what the issue between CEO and minister had been about. Perhaps we'd never know. Perhaps the grapevine would whisper after a few days ...

Brian Hone had said the government system needed a hundred good headmasters. He thought, rightly or wrongly, that a good headmaster was the foundation stone of a good institution. I'd had his idea in my head for many years and I finally rejected it on the day that TAFE's top man resigned. State education needed a tradition that it wasn't going to get. Building an enviable statewide system was a huge task, not least because it involved imposing similarities on something which had to cater for the identities of various regions in various ways. Clichés would have to be stated and restated, endlessly, until they'd become sufficiently established to let their variations grow. This would take far beyond the span of the normal state government, people would change, other ideas would come with new people ... What I wanted was never going to happen. I was within a year of retirement when this resignation occurred. I knew little enough about the TAFE man and next to nothing about the minister. I didn't know the issue. I was caught up in the development of the new certificate that would replace – wipe out – the things I'd been working on for years, and those things had only come about because of muddles in the education 'system', if you'll excuse the word. System! There was little that was systematic about it, except perhaps the forms, the pay scales, maybe the brands of paint or floor-wax in use! The system was only systematic in things that didn't matter. I had a year to go, I had an immediate task – ensuring that the qualities of our tertiary orientation programs weren't lost in what was being developed – and I had, well in my view by now, an open door, waiting, beckoning. The door began to call: here's your way out. You've longed for it. See how bright things are, after the darkness on your side of the door.

The internal dynamics of a group are unpredictable, but important for the quality of teaching. I had an art class for English and a young man called Eddy looked to be the heart of the group. He was small, quick, and set the pace for the others. I had high hopes of what we would achieve when we got onto the novels we were going to study. Then

something happened to him, and he lost interest. His essays grew shorter and they said nothing. He was polite, but withdrawn. He wasn't doing enough work to pass the subject and I gave up on him.

Then a girl called Nola became interested. She read the novels I told them we'd be working on and asked questions that showed how far her mind had already advanced. She moved around the table from her habitual place and sat beside me, on my right. Her friend Sophie, Greek like Nola, responded by becoming much more vocal in class, though this was of doubtful benefit because Sophie was the sort of person who needed to be central, via drama rather than by thoughtful contribution. She was inconsistent and demanding. She was a nuisance, really, but she was there, and Nola took on the job of calming her down. This amused me, and I was grateful. Over time I became aware that Nola was - how shall I put it? – absorbing my personality. She sat close to me – very close – because she wanted to see the room and the things that happened in the way that I saw them. This was learning by osmosis as much as by anything else and I didn't feel troubled by it because she had objectivity and a sense of humour that reassured me. I felt a little more valuable than I had before this interest developed. The weeks passed, Eddy almost dropped out, then came back, but was never at his best again, Nola kept the classes alive, and Sophie tried to make them as unstable as she was. Sometimes she sat facing me, though Nola stayed by my side. One morning, they were the first of the class to arrive, and Sophie told me she might be leaving soon because she was pregnant. I looked at her in surprise. 'It was real bad luck,' she said, 'we only ever did it once!' I didn't believe that for a moment and I sensed that Nola, standing not far from me, knew it wasn't true.

I dare say I asked Sophie if her family knew, and if the boy's family knew, then the other students arrived and the conversation was cut off. This was one drama Sophie didn't want to publicise. I felt Nola's closeness quite strongly that morning, as if by merging herself into me she could cut off the emotional demands her friend was making. The

year rolled on, Sophie left, Eddie handed in a thin, disappointing folder of work and I knew he wouldn't pass, while Nola flourished. The year ended, the weeks of holiday rolled by, then the following year started. Busy, busy, busy. One lunchtime I came back from the bank in High Street, parked my car in its usual spot and got out. Coming toward me in the street was Nola. She'd been to the general office to collect something, and she was on her way home again. I had no idea where she lived. I said it was lovely to see her, but I really couldn't stop to talk because there were heaps of things I had to sort out as soon as I got back to my department. To my surprise, she put her arms around me. If this sounds erotic, it didn't seem so to me. I think she was curious. Then she let me go, and I crossed Saint Georges Road. Was I surprised? I decided that I wasn't. The embrace had been consistent with sitting close to me, the previous year. It was also, I thought, a letting go. Then I asked myself how I felt about what had happened, and I felt pleased, and serene. I had no sympathy at all with teachers who got themselves into relationships with students, but I didn't tax myself with this. Nonetheless, the incident stuck in my mind as something to try to work out, and there it stayed for two or three years until another something happened.

I was driving up Waterdale Road in Ivanhoe, my home suburb, approaching the intersection with Banksia Street. I drew level with a large black car; level, because it was going straight ahead, and I was turning right. I glanced at the driver of the other car and it was Nola. She glanced across, and, recognising me, she grinned. I don't actually remember my reaction but I'm sure I smiled. I must have smiled! Then our cars went on (Nola) and right (me). This final meeting must sound trifling, petty, insignificant, but I realised as I drove up Banksia Street in the direction of Heidelberg, that I felt fulfilled. Something had been completed, and it had been a joy to us both.

**T**he next of these observations also concerns the relations between teachers and students, but the relations point in more than one

direction. One of our tertiary orientation programs was in art, and it ran parallel to a certificate course, also in art. Certificate courses at that time were strictly vocational whereas the tertiary orientation program led towards a tertiary art school, normally, in our case, our related Philip Institute (names change all the time). The teachers at Philip, several of them well known artists themselves, showed interest in our course because they were going to inherit the students. It was always a pleasure to go to a TOP art meeting and find that Philip was represented, not by the one person necessary for a quorum, but perhaps half a dozen of the tertiary staff, supportive in the best possible way. Then a new TAFE teacher, coming in from outside, became head of our art department. He taught certificate students and had little sympathy with the tertiary directed ones, though both groups worked in the same building. One of our art teachers, whom I shall call Tess, came to me with a complaint. Bob, the new man, wanted the TOP students to work on a restricted scale. He saw no sense in them working on broad pieces of canvas, or paper, when the certificate students did smaller work. It seemed, from what I was told, that he thought the TOP students were enjoying a self-indulgent time at the college. All the *real* jobs in art were at a simpler level, like making mass-produced jewellery, and if that's where the jobs were, that's what the students should be learning to do. I discussed this situation with the director. 'The art school at Philip,' I told him, 'have always liked what they've been getting. They're the goal our TOP students aim to reach. Our course doesn't have accreditation without their support, and they support it strongly. I can't see why Bob wants anything to be different. His certificate students are a different kettle of fish. I think he should leave the TOP staff to go on as they have been.' The director listened, and asked me to 'investigate'. I did. Tess and her colleagues told me what they'd already told me. Bob said what those who hated him said he would say. All this unrealistic stuff (TOP) was going on in the same building where the certificate students did real work and it didn't make any sense. I tried to make him see things in the way of

the staff at Philip but he bundled them with his own subordinates who wouldn't see the sense of what he was advocating.

I wrote a report for the director. I was on the side of the TOP teachers but felt my position to be an awkward one. My position as co-ordinator didn't outrank Bob's as head of department, nor did I want it to. There were dozens of TOP teachers in the college and I had never tried to claim superiority in rank. It hadn't been necessary. Any leadership that I provided was by information and by example. I wondered how the director had become saddled with someone as unsuitable as Bob, and rather wished that the problem could be removed.

It was. Bob fell in love with one of his certificate students. A dry, hard man, he found in himself an inexplicable passion. The student, whom I never met, would have been nineteen or twenty. All the teachers in Bob's department, and I assume most of the students too, were aware of what was going on. Tess saw her chance. She somehow contrived to make the director aware of the situation with Bob and his student. The director called Bob in and suggested he take some leave. I can imagine him telling his department head that it would give him a chance to work things out. Bob took leave, and, as you may imagine, he didn't return. Where he went, I have no idea. Just how Tess ensured that the director became aware of Bob's passion I never enquired. A suitable outcome, from my point of view, had been arranged. I don't even know if the staff at Philip Institute were aware of how the threat had been removed. Stories circulate, so it's likely that they knew, but they weren't close enough for me to hear. I didn't want to know. Sometimes it's enough to know how circumstances are shaping themselves, after which one can step back and wait ...

**I** taught a subject called Australian Society. I've already mentioned walks around various parts of Melbourne, and reading some of our poets, including Bruce Dawe. In one of the early years of the subject I had a group which met, among other times, on Wednesday at

three, finishing at four. A teacher in another department instigated a timetable change that meant that one of my students, a Greek girl called Alexi, had a clash between Biology and my subject. Alexi told me that she could 'catch up' with Australian Society by talking to the other students but dared not miss Biology. The following week I told her that if she cared to come at four, I'd happily repeat my lesson of the previous hour; I didn't want her to miss out. This was stubborn of me, and it also shows my helplessness because I didn't, at that stage, want to be distracted from classroom teaching by administrative arrangements. A few years later, when Kevin Moore had taken control, something like this wouldn't have been allowed to happen. Another week passed, then Alexi joined me in the largest of our rooms, an area that ran from one side of the building to the other. It was also, when not occupied, a passageway for humanities staff to get to their cupboard-sized offices. Alexi and I went through the poems that I'd dealt with in the previous hour. Because there were fewer people to interact with, we finished a little early. Alexi left, thanking me courteously, and I remember noticing how different the atmosphere of the room, indeed of the whole college, was at five as opposed to the same place at four. It was darker, cooler, less human in some way. I put my things on my desk in the warren behind the wide classroom, and went home. The following week I was ready to repeat my lesson at four, but Alexi didn't come. I sat in the empty room waiting, and one or two of my colleagues passed through on the way to their rooms. I chatted to them as they passed. Something told me that Alexi hadn't been comfortable with the arrangement of the week before. I hadn't realised it at the time but in retrospect I could see that she hadn't liked being alone with a man in an emptying building. I said nothing to her about this, she kept coming to classes when she could be with the other young people, and the poetry unit, like the rest of the subject, moved on according to plan.

I asked myself if I had said or done anything wrong. No, I hadn't. What, then? It was the atmosphere, the circumstance, the

surroundings. The large classroom next to the teachers' studies was wide open to inspection, a place of minimal privacy, and certainly no secrecy ... but it felt different at the later time of day. The feeling of being part of a crowd, with the safety that implies, began to seep away. Perhaps Alexi's family had commented on her being home later than usual? Who could say? Perhaps Alexi sensed that the surest way of maintaining her trust in her teachers was not to let distrust creep into her mind. So she stayed away. I was sorry that this had happened but had to respect what she'd done. Normality, having been disturbed, had to be restored. It was. The poetry unit concluded. Which poems? I want to think it was Judith Wright but I don't remember. If it was Judith Wright, which poems? Ah ...

What I do remember, thinking about it now, is how Alexi's face had grown tighter in the last minutes before we'd finished our session. I hadn't taken any notice at the time but now that the matter, the problem, had been brought into focus, I realised that she'd become uncomfortable and was wishing herself away. I might have responded by ending the session quickly, but my mind was set in another direction; I had, at last and at least, realised this, but I could not, now, reopen the matter. Alexi had closed it, and it was hers to close. This saddened me, but one must respect others' wishes when they're made apparent.

**P**reston TAFE offered a considerable range of courses. The programs for which I was responsible offered subjects in art, music, drama, business and the sciences, as well as what was called general studies. People sang, painted, played the piano, took part in dramatic productions in which they learned to use their bodies and their voices. They drew from life, they drew from the world. They learned about economics, environmental science, biology, physics, chemistry and a variety of mathematics. They could choose from ethics, cinema and film study, social theory, social psychology, mass media, sociology, women's studies, literature and more. The total enrolment at pre-tertiary level was about four hundred and fifty, which meant that we operated on a

scale beyond that offered by schools and colleges more highly regarded than we were. It amused me that Preston, a place with no reputation for education, had created something almost unmatched in the state. I felt that if we could only keep low and out of sight, we might do good for years. Teachers came and went, but the commitment and for most part the quality were there. Once or twice I became aware of situations where a teacher had done something which was, in my eyes, a sackable offence, but I chose to keep these misdeeds quiet. Others, I knew, were doing the same. The art teacher Tess, as mentioned before, was so frustrated by her head of department's outlook and policies that she managed to make the director aware of his failings, but I didn't want to act in that way, justifiable as it may have been. If I had been in the director's chair I would almost certainly have acted differently – but I wasn't, except for that brief moment when I discovered that his chair was higher than those of others in the room.

I never wanted to be director, or higher, but, and paradoxically, I wanted systems that were truly creative and inspiring to be part of, and the people responsible for making such systems never seemed to be there. I preferred to stay low and since that had been my choice, I had to live with the shortcomings it entailed. I've already referred to the huge trees that my students saw when we went walking in Toorak. Some of these gardens were sumptuous, and in a way the educational development I was in charge of at Preston was my attempt to give the region a garden such as it had never had before. Many, many students in the arts and sciences, the areas of business and humanities, had flourished in our hands and gone on to a variety of achievements in the way that I expected. In Ivanhoe one morning I was buying bread at a bakery that served coffee and cakes to early starters and a man whom I didn't remember told me that he was a barrister who'd got his start at Preston, and he was on his way to Heidelberg magistrates' court to defend somebody that morning. I scarcely recognised Preston's teaching in his description, but that's an inevitable subjectivity in an educational offering: people make of it whatever they can, and need.

I wished him well as he set off for his day in court, and I came home to write ...

Writing had always been my passion. I'd loved teaching poetry, and novels, I'd loved showing people how to use their language to good effect: it was what I did myself, and there could hardly be a better balance of inner mission and socially useful contribution than in sharing this passion with those who needed it. I had myself attended a school that was nowhere near as good as it was famous, but still managed to be successful enough, until a headmaster of genius made it what it had always claimed to be. I'd operated in a state system which had succeeded in reaching only the low levels where its sights were set. As my years at Preston drew to an end I thought of the social life – I mean sex and drinking – of some of the teachers I had found myself with, years before, and it seemed a miracle to me that we had been able to raise the level – to lift the floor, so to speak – as high as we had done. The idea of gardening comes to mind again, gardening in a desert, and we, dozens of us, had made the garden grow, until the inevitable system-changes swept everything away. This was a matter of considerable sadness to me, but there was nothing I could do about it, except to tell myself that the value of what we'd done lay in the moments when we'd been actively doing – teaching, explaining, listening, questioning, leading, waiting, and so on. I'd never had much time for teachers who were concentrating, not on what they were doing in the present, but on where it would lead them in their careers. I thought it contemptuous of teachers – and contemptible – to regard their work not so much as a service for the people in front of them as a stepping stone to somewhere else. I thought – I think – of Nadine and Nola, of Lenny Pascoe and Trevor, and I am in the happy position of not knowing where they are now, and not needing to know. I do not speak from indifference, I speak from certainty. They, and hundreds like them, were well-made people, with good minds and living hearts, who needed only to be assisted, then set loose again. It may be sad to lose sight of those one had regarded tenderly, but sadder to try to

entangle them with bonds. I speak of the point where love intersects with freedom, and love gives freedom as a gift. That is where good teachers and their students meet, and it will be a rare system that ensures that this central virtue of the profession can happen regularly. That would be a system responsive to the innermost pulsing of good teachers' hearts, I never saw it, but I suppose I may be foolish enough to hope that it will manifest itself one of these days ... somewhere ...