

## Chaplains Day 3 August 23 John Foulcher

Some of John's published poetry collections can be [found here](#).

John began by reading an unpublished poem, **Absence**. This poem told the story of a student called Will from a teacher's perspective.

- If you spend 40 years in a school (as I have done), every one of us will have an equivalent of Will – the student we lost, the one we couldn't save;
- But it's the circumstances of the incident which precipitated this poem which I want to talk about;
- I was deputy, these two Year 12 boys (Tom and Will) were reported to me for skipping chapel;
- I asked them why they'd skipped – 'Oh chapel is so boring,' they said. 'It's irrelevant' and so on – so I decided instead of 90 minutes of mind-numbing time on Thursday afternoon detention they could come and speak to me about the meaning of life – it was an energetic, animated discussion; we talked about whether God existed, among other things;
- After an hour I said, 'Well, I've wasted enough of your time, you can go' – 'Waste?' Tom replied, 'That was great! We're going to skip chapel again!' – 'You do' I said, 'and you'll be staring at a brick wall for a couple of hours'
- 'Great'? what was great? They just did what they should have been doing in their RE classes for the past four years. What was happening in their regular classes that made them excited about giving up their Thursday afternoon to talk about the meaning of life? I think it was about agency – they felt in control, they felt that they were the ones directing the discussion, not me.

And that's the single thing I want to talk about today – the importance of agency, of empowering our students, of giving them ownership of their spiritual experience and respecting that ownership. And, just as example, I want to share some of the

ways I tried to embody this in my RE classes. In giving the kids control like this, we don't need to be afraid of losing control of the curriculum (NB I'm largely talking about the students' experience of the Christian faith and life in their Senior years – 10 to 12).

- I would begin the year by saying 'I don't care what you think, but I do care that you think.' It was disarming for students, who saw me as the professional Christian out to convert them. It signalled I had no agenda;
- The next lesson, was the 'frontier mothers exercise' (from Joseph Fletcher's 1966 seminal book, *Situation Ethics: A New Morality* (you can look it up) – the following discussion involved them taking sides – those who thought the first mother did the right thing could sit on one side of the room and those supporting the second mother could sit on the other side of the room – the discussion was kinetic and required them to be committed, though they were permitted to change sides if convinced by the opposition's argument (both sides recorded on the board). It's always more complex – the idea was to set up a binary and then break it down;
- Similarly with the next lesson, I asked students 'Do you believe in God'. Most were unsure but I explained to them that we're all agnostics (none of us know) and there are only practical theists and atheists, no they had to take a side – yes or no – and commit to it;
- The myriad issues that arose from this – science, the nature of Biblical writing, the problem of pain and suffering, lived experience, other religions gave us our at least first semester's work (which you'd already prepared, because you had a fair idea what they'd say!) – but the kids have owned it, they've created it to address where they are now;
- If you want to think about this theologically, this is Jesus's method – he didn't impose, he responded and he challenged;

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In first year at university, I joined the Evangelical Union, but I was the iconoclast, always asking questions (I was interested in Bahai ); I wanted to know why Christianity felt the need for exclusivity . Most EU members would say, ‘Oh you should talk to Peter Brown about that’ (The man I’m calling Peter Brown was the EU president, completing a PhD in philosophy). One day, there he was – ‘People tell me I should talk to you’, he said, and we arranged a time, walked in the forest and I did most of the talking for a couple of hours. At the end of our time, he said, ‘I began this conversation wondering whether you were a Christian. Now I see you’re something more – you’re a seeker after truth’. At the time, that statement meant the world to me. Long afterwards, I took it as Peter’s approval of my obvious genius, but it wasn’t – to him, what I had to say must have seemed the most banal of platitudes, but he honoured me and where I was on my journey. He made me feel the ship of faith was big enough, that I was welcome even though I didn’t at the time sign up to its credos. He accepted me at the point I was on my journey. He had no agenda except to affirm.

Kids can smell an agenda, they know when we’re being disingenuous, they know when we’re silently assuming we know better than they do, even if we say nothing – but in my time as a spiritual leader in schools, I came to think that we don’t feel we have to do God’s work for God – all we have to do is to create the environment, affirm our students, step back and let God do things in God’s own time. Above all, I think we should encourage them to be seekers after truth.

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The young man who was the subject of the poem I read to you was a troubled young man. I doubt if anything we did at school could have saved him. But who

knows? Who knows how his life would have turned out if he'd felt he had owned his experience of the Christian faith during his years at school, if he'd felt he'd been affirmed in constructing his own pathway in his search for meaning? Who knows?