

THE SPIRITUAL ROLE OF THE HEAD

Workshop Presentation: The Reverend Paul Bland

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Comrades

This presentation is the last in a series of reflections I have been asked to present at conferences and seminars over the last year on the topic of spirituality and leadership. Until now, however, the audience has been composed almost exclusively of Heads. We could close the doors, exclude the uninitiated and speak very frankly to one another. It's quite a different thing to present a topic like this to senior staff, members of Councils and Chaplains who, in a sense, run a daily audit on the spiritual leadership of their Heads. There's a wise old saying that "*No man is a hero to his valet.*" I suspect that also means: "*No Head is a hero to his or her Chaplain.*" I'll take the risk, however, and speak frankly even with the doors open and in mixed company.

I want to start with three simple propositions that just about cover this topic. They are these:

- **Firstly, the spiritual leadership of the Head starts with a sense of bigness.**
- **Secondly, how we understand the spiritual role of the Head begins with how we understand what schools do.**
- **And finally, spirituality is a quality that all people in the school family share and exercise.**

Now perhaps you're thinking that these truths are self-evident and that nothing could be more obvious. As we unpack the meaning of these propositions however, I think we'll find some surprising conclusions.

Let's go back to the first proposition: that the spiritual leadership of the Head starts with a sense of bigness. Where does the "*bigness*" of the Head find its focus? We all know the Head as the person who has the biggest office, the biggest car, and the longest number of letters after his or her name on the Speech Night program. We know the Head as the person who speaks longest at assembly and who is paid the largest salary. All of these things speak about a kind of bigness, I suppose, but none of them define the bigness I'm talking about.

The Head is the person in the school who [above everyone else] is required to take the big picture of what is happening. Other people on the staff may be partial and self-interested and in many ways, they are required to be by their job descriptions. In my P12 school I expect the Infants Co-ordinator to be an energetic advocate for the special learning needs of small children; I expect the coach of the Year 7 Softball girls to believe that their winning the premierships is as deserving of praise in the Newsletter as the first ever premiership for our First XI Cricket players. I expect my Librarian to have an inexhaustible shopping list of books and resources always about her person just in case I ever find enough money to fund the Library properly, and I expect the Music staff to be forever sensitive to the fact that Music takes students away from class much less frequently than Sport. [I'm sure that you can add your own list here.] Out of all this partiality comes the commonwealth and the school moves forward. The Head has the responsibility of seeing the bigness and inviting others to share the view.

As the Head manages this process of bigness, he or she is uniquely placed to minister to the school family. Personal growth, personal suffering, individual success and failure are the daily experience of the Head who listens, encourages and nurtures. Of course this bigness manifests itself in various forms.

The wise Head has a sense of the bigness of the curriculum, the bigness of the whole school program, the bigness of the education process itself and the bigness of the financial arrangements which sustain schools. The sense of spiritual bigness starts with a deep respect for the life of the mind and the spirit in all its forms.

In practice, this means that Heads have to read widely and think deeply. I don't know how they can get their sense of bigness otherwise. They have to have a sense of their own spiritual growth and feel comfortable



with the bigness of our faith. They have to be positive people. They have to believe that we can change and for that reason alone you can never give up on people. You have to believe that the journey is more important than the arrival and that the job is never finished.

Let me give you an example of what this might mean in practice. What does the Head require in spiritual terms when it comes time to appoint new staff or promote staff internally? What kind of test is applied? Do we take as our standard: only Anglicans need apply? Do we go further and ask whether the applicant is a communicant of a local parish? What happens if the Head has to choose between one applicant who is a devout communicant in the Uniting Church and another who writes in the Application form that they are Church of England? We cannot say, as Anglican schools, that the religious values and observances of our staff are none of our business. What we can sensibly say, however, is that this is a faith community in which we are all pilgrims on a journey at different stages and that this journey together is more important than anything else we do. Armed with that value, you can look critically at some of the things we do and say.

When I arrived at Canterbury College six years ago the school had been through one of those convulsive, heart-breaking conflicts that figure in the history of every school at some stage. There were a lot of hurting people whose courage and sacrifice in staying with the school when it was in trouble needed to be affirmed; there was also an intense good will and desire to move on. No Head could have asked for a greater welcome than I was accorded. Some things could be settled quickly; others are taking a great deal longer. Let me share two aspects of the spiritual life of the school that have been the focus of attention over the last six years. Firstly, the easy one. There was no tradition in the school of celebrating the Eucharist. That didn't mean that there hadn't been celebrations of Holy Communion in the past but without a Chaplain, or a Priest to serve the school, this was something that was foreign for students, most of their parents and for many of the staff. How could we turn this around?

Well, we began by setting ourselves a goal. We would prepare children for their First Communion at school in Year 5 and we would do this again in Year 8 when we moved from a two stream to a four stream year group. That way we would build up in the school, over time, a situation where all the students would be aware of the meaning of the celebration. If they chose to make their communion in Year 5, that was fine. If they decided to wait, that was also fine because when we came to celebrate the Eucharist, they would be prepared. We moved from big, whole school non-Eucharistic services to small-scale Chapel services at school for just one class with their parents. We decided to make the Eucharist a part of every school camp from Year 5 onwards and some of the most intimate services we've had have been in the open air or in camp recreation huts. At first, the results were very discouraging. Few students wanted to share in the Communion; the distribution of the elements became a grim time with very restless and irreverent students threatened into silence by teachers and the Priest stopping the service to remind everyone of the significance of the occasion. This was not at all what we had hoped to achieve when we went down this path.

Then after a while, we got smarter at doing this. We decided that even though few of the students might receive Communion, we would invite all the students to the sanctuary for a blessing. That way, the decision on whether to go forward [with all the peer group pain that might entail] was done away with. Now more students shared in the Communion. The restlessness seemed to disappear before we noticed that it was gone. Now, we can celebrate Communion in our Chapel with our students showing focus and insight and reverence. We've very slowly turned that culture around even though it's got a long way to go.

I wish I could say we've been as successful with the other blight on our spirituality – a love of gossip and spiteful stories. This is one area in which the sense of bigness of the Head becomes vitally important. I'm talking about a range of things here: the unprofessional way some staff talk about students in staff rooms; the wounding stories older students tell about one another; the power of the car-park gossip to misrepresent and trivialise things. This last feature deserves a paper on its own. All I want to note here is its insidious power: if you could put it in a bottle, you could put a man on the moon. The Head has the responsibility to take on this aspect of the culture of the school; it's as important as the curriculum. One way I've tried to do this is to model for everyone the way information – particularly sensitive and personal information – is managed within the school. I have had to be alert to every opportunity to say: *“please don't repeat that*



story; *it's not true and it's not fair*". On one or two occasions I have written about this matter directly to parents and on others, tracked the spiteful story to its source and confronted the person with the untruth of the matter. I would be very pleased to hear from anyone who has the solution.

Back to the bigness. There is a lovely prayer for Heads that reads: *Lord, give me broader shoulders or thicker skin!* It's true. It's a burden certainly but it is also a real opportunity to have an impact on the culture of the school. Other people on staff can lose their temper, sulk if they don't get their own way or avoid following policy because they're tired or busy. You're too big for that. Other people can hold a grudge, be reluctant to forgive or think some job is beneath their dignity. You're too big for that. I suspect that this is the real meaning of the much vaunted "servant leadership" we hear about. The Head with the big picture in his or her mind and heart is the one who can say with confidence to a school family obsessed by little things: "We're better than this."

So the first quality I want to commend to you is bigness.

If the first quality in the spirituality of the Head is bigness, a close second must be a certain idea of what is happening at school. Last year Mr Gilbert Case and I were invited to meet the new Anglican Heads who had been appointed to Cannon Hill Anglican College, St Luke's Anglican School, and Whitsunday Anglican School and to talk to them about the same topic I am sharing with you now. Dr Coman was responsible for structuring the discussion after the presentation and he began by remarking: *"Paul, almost nothing you've said about the spirituality of the Head would apply just to Anglican schools. The same things would apply to Catholic schools, Baptist schools and state schools as well."* He's right. There isn't a normatively Anglican spirituality for Heads although there are, of course, normatively Anglican schools. The difference in the spirit and culture of schools doesn't come out of a denominational base so much as a world view or philosophical base held by the leadership in the school. It took me a long time to be comfortable with this idea but I believe it's essentially true. Good state schools have spiritual Heads who take the spiritual lives of their school communities seriously. The down side of this is that there are Church schools even now which are inimical to the Spirit. There might be the outward husk of a religious foundation but that's where the spirituality stops.

The defining feature, I believe, is the model of a school from which the Head is working. How does the Head conceptualise what is happening in a school? What language - what imagery - does the Head use when talking about what is happening? Here are some images to get you thinking:

• **Model Number 1**

Firstly, we can imagine the school as a factory. Heads who think this way usually get on well with their Business Managers because they come to believe that the bottom line is the all important test of a successful school. [I'm sorry; that's base libel on Business Managers!] Here are the questions Heads who follow this model seem to ask:

- Have we made the target quota? [Of premierships, of OP 1s, of enrolments, of endowments etc.]
- What outputs have we made this year? [Heads who follow this model are very big on words like 'benchmarks' and 'outcomes'. They also love elegant strategic plans and performance indicators.]

Now this is not a bad model to follow but there are problems if it's the only model you use. There is a temptation to imagine that things that can be measured are important and that the end product is more important than the process that produces it. Lazy Councils love this model because it allows them to measure very easily whether the Head is being effective.

• **Model Number 2**

On a bad day, school appears to me like the North West Province of British India. The Head is the British Resident encumbered with the management of this vast territory full of ungrateful and incorrigible Natives



who have to be hectored into line by sheer force of personality and will. I love that scene from *Carry On Up the Khyber* where Sidney James is the Governor of the province and without missing a beat, he continues on with his dinner party while a horde of blood-thirsty Pathans are attacking the residency and the place is shaking with the battle all around. He keeps his cool under fire and of course, triumphs in the end. There is actually more in this image that I find attractive than the image of the factory. At least it's alive and exciting and school certainly feels sometimes as if you're under siege and everyone else is fractious and ungrateful.

And the Head's role occasionally requires real, visceral courage. Talk to Heads where there has been an accident involving a school bus or if there has been a suicide by child or teacher or a similar tragedy. These are spiritual qualities: the ability to give hope when there is despair everywhere and to act with a confidence that says to everyone we can front this and see it through. This is a real test of the spiritual strength of the Head. I'm sure that every Head watched with very personal pain as the Principal of the Primary school in Rockhampton had to manage the school reaction to the murder of Keyra Steinhardt last year. This was a State Primary School; the Head had to comfort and support staff and students with the media recording her words and actions. Yet she did this with dignity and courage. Every Head here could tell their own story of the time that their courage was put to the test when they had to face a similar situation.

- **Model No 3**

Finally, there are models of school leadership that come out of the idea of community and family. Even big schools find these models real and attractive and have remarkable success in making them work. I was once faced with an explosive racial situation when I was the Principal of Mount Isa State High School. A 17-year-old Aboriginal boy who had been a student at the other city State High School had been killed in a tragic road accident. He was very well known in the city and much loved, so many students at my school were deeply affected by his death. His funeral on a hot Wednesday afternoon was, as you can imagine, large and filled with the bitterness and pain that attends such functions. The next day, I was alerted to worrying stories about photographs of the dead boy being circulated among students. The photographs were polaroids which had been taken by some highly insensitive person at the funeral home where the boy's body had been laid out for mourners to see. Then one Year 11 boy had been overheard to say that one more dead Aborigine was no loss to anyone. That comment, retold and embellished among the black students of the school, led to the confrontation just outside my office. Black students cornered the offending white student; his mates immediately went to his aid. About 30 students were involved in what can only be described as a fully blown race riot.

The student alleged to have made the remark was badly beaten; but for the fact that a micro-surgeon from Cairns was visiting the City and managed to reattach the upper lip to the rest of his face, the boy would have been permanently disfigured. Black and white students were injured; for the next week, my Deputy and I could do nothing else other than process the incident: firstly with the injured students, then with parents, then in small groups and finally with the whole school community. The model I worked from was not the tempting one of judicial process – expelling all the offenders [black and white] as a warning to others. The model was one of family. As the Head, I felt personally responsible – the same way I did when one of my own sons did something wrong at school. What had happened was appalling but inevitable given the pain involved. As a family, every one of us was diminished by what had happened. The whole family had lost because black students within the school had felt devalued and shamed by what had been said and done and had sought to resolve the matter with their fists. When the talking was finished, we lost three students from the school on expulsion. The process had been very draining and exhausting but after that next weekend, students returned to school and life went on without rancour or bitterness. The sadness was over in just the same way that families blow up sometimes and then settle.

Reconciliation, justice, punishment and forgiveness are spiritual dimensions of the process of education. So too are dignity and self esteem. The Head is required above anyone else in the school to exemplify these qualities. They go with the territory.



Finally, I said that spirituality is a quality that all people in the school family share and exercise. Sometimes the spirituality is explicit in the job description. If the sign on the door says Chaplain, everyone will expect you to take the lead in matters of spirituality. But the important fact to remember is that ministry and spirituality are gifts of the Holy Spirit and while some of us have more, we all have some part of the gift. Part of the spirituality of the Head is that he allows others to minister to him. Sometimes this ministry is exercised by the Chaplain; it is very often exercised by other Heads. There have been memorable times in my life when it has been done by parents – and once or twice by students. [Now, there's a humbling experience.]

This is a lonely job but it doesn't have to be as lonely as we make it. If we slip into the model of the Head as the steely nerved British governor of the North West Province then we will fool ourselves into imagining that we have to have all the answers, all the time. It doesn't work.

Harold Kushner wrote about the quantum leap we make at some point in our childhood when we can accept that Dad will not repair the broken toy; not because he doesn't want to, but because he cannot. Somehow or other we have to make that leap with Heads. Your Head may not do all the things you want him or her to do for the very same reason. At that point, it's time to get along side your Head and say with the writer of the lovely hymn:

*Brother, sister, let me serve you,
Let me be as Christ to you,
Pray that I might have the grace
To let you be my servant too.*

Before I finish, I want to point out two of the negative components of the spirituality of the Head which you are probably already wanting to flag for me. The first one is that Heads are subjected to temptations from which ordinary mortals are preserved. It is a temptation to be able to have the last word on most matters. It is a temptation to go to those members of your staff who will tell you what you want to hear and then to pretend that you have consulted with others before you made a decision. It is a temptation to confuse your interests with the interests of the school as a whole. It is a temptation to promote yourself when you tell others and yourself that you are promoting the school. Fortunately, most of us are married and therefore have someone close at hand to draw our attention to these lapses of discretion and moments of confusion.

We cannot be too careful where the matter of self knowledge is concerned. This is nowhere seen more obviously than on the occasions when the Head has to sack an employee or expel a student from the school – the two hardest things we do.

I want to illustrate this point with a great story recorded in one of my favourite books – *The Heart Aroused* by David Whyte. Whyte retells the story of the Irish hero, Fionn, who is orphaned at an early age and adopted by his aunts who hesitate to tell him who his father is. Sometime in the future, you see, he will have to face his hereditary enemy and until he is a warrior, he has to avoid the conflict. He is prepared for life as an adult male in the forest by another warrior who shows him one day a spear, tied by cloth into the thicket of a wood. The spear is beautiful but is spiteful and dangerous – not simply to the person on whom it is used but the person who wields it. For that reason it is kept tied up so that it cannot be used lightly or without deliberative care.

Here is how David Whyte applies the image of the spiteful spear to managers in business. He could be talking directly about Heads, however, who must manage the most painful decisions about the future of an employee or a student when the time comes to part company:

Build the kind of world you want but remember the spear and don't unbind it until your mind is clear and the time is right for its peculiarly ruthless presence. Even the kindest managers face the telling moment when they must fire an inefficient but otherwise likeable employee. They know that the man or woman will suffer tremendous emotional and financial pain, but the situation can no longer be sustained. If they have been



wisely told where the spear lies and when to use it, they untie the cloth for the moment it is needed and then are able to bind it up again just as quickly.

And finally, the Head has an enormous capacity to harm as well as help. While I was preparing this reflection, I spoke to someone about the difficulty of changing school culture and he said, a little glibly, “*Oh, it takes years to turn a school culture around.*” I know what he meant and he’s half right. I think that it takes a long time to make positive changes to school culture; sadly, it doesn’t take a long time to change a school culture for the worse. Last December I heard an old doctor give some very good advice to some newly graduating Medical students. *Never forget*, he said, *that you will meet patients in your career whom you cannot help. But you will never meet a patient whom you cannot hurt.* The same could easily be said about Heads and the myriad of interactions that make up their work as the spiritual leader in schools.

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