

Truths, trends and traditions in Lutheran education – taking a stand

The challenge of Authority and knowing to whom or what it should be granted is related to the task of knowing which 'trends' one should respond and adapt to and which ones should be resisted because they challenge one's core Truths. This poses a real dilemma because all institutions do need to change with the times. Luther famously and rightly claimed that the church should constantly be renewing and reforming itself. Schools, too, of course. What is renewal and reform? It is a commitment to the 'life' of the truth and the ability to communicate it in changing contexts. The difficulty of course is that in the process of 'reforming', we must maintain a delicate balance between preserving our truths and making the changes to our traditions (or practices) necessary for those truths to find life in a new context, a setting which is sometimes downright hostile to them or too eager to water them down to make them more palatable.

My contention is that in educational terms, true teaching and learning is today threatened by similar 'short cuts' – promises to secure 'educational salvation' in the form of 'outcomes' by measures (works), promises to ensure 'happiness' for our young people via slogans, clichés and clinical drugs, and the prevalent and deeply mistaken belief that information is communication.

I am going to argue that like Luther, educators need to reclaim the Authority of Being. We, too, are surrounded by practices that promise salvation but lead spirits into darkness.

The Gospel in education, is, I suggest, comprised of three key aspects:

1. Imaginative possibility (a call to a deeper encounter with Being)
2. Self-identification (development of individuality and uniqueness with a moral compass)
3. Social interaction (authentic communication and encounter)

In secular terms, this might be put as "fulfil one's potential, live out one's dreams and make a difference". But those of us who have encountered deeper reality must remember that our potential is infinitely greater than this. C S Lewis once described it thus: "If we let Him – for we can prevent Him if we choose – He will make the feeblest and filthiest of us into a god or goddess, a dazzling, radiant, immortal creature, pulsating all through with such energy and joy and wisdom and love as we cannot now imagine, a bright stainless mirror which reflects back to God perfectly (though of course on a smaller scale) His own boundless power and delight and goodness. The process will be long and in parts very painful, but that is what we are in for. Nothing less." (*Mere Christianity*)

Education in schools like yours is not merely a matter of passing on human knowledge. All true teaching and learning sets knowledge and skills against the backdrop of Faith and the possibility of human fulfilment and, which, therefore expands humanity (understood with transcendent reference), facilitates self-understanding (of a created being as opposed to a self-creating one) and enhances relational capacity (the ability to love others).

Our context and our challenge

I believe there are three quite distinct challenges to our Educational Truths and their Authority in the form of contemporary trends. The three trends are quite distinct but I believe they are all related to each other and have their origin in the fact that culturally we have lost Faith in Being.

True faith is a kind of inner comprehension, the poise of being graced in a relationship constituted by obedience, conscience and love. Whilst it is at its heart, a mystery, it is also that which provides bearings for being.

What are the trends of our time and why are they to be resisted? I think we can identify three clear trends which present a different set of truths to rival the Authority of the Truths of Faith.

Trends:

1. Authority of Science/Measurement (if it cannot be measured it does not exist)
2. Authority of Ego/Individualism (when spirit or soul recedes, ego becomes dominant and needs new bearings and controls – normally in morally neutral language, like ‘that’s inappropriate’ or ‘that’s normal’)
3. Authority of Information (to disseminate is not to communicate)

These three trends form a kind of Secular Trinity of Truths. Because there is no interior world and no transcendent horizon, the self needs constructing and constraining and because there is no ‘being’ seeking ‘meaning’, information in the form of ‘data’ replaces understanding and communication between selves.

1. Authority of Science/Technological Measures

Science has stepped up to provide new bearings for being. Its creed is essentially this:

Where do we come from? Random evolutionary mutations
Why am I here? To preserve my life, to reproduce, seek pleasure, avoid pain
What happens at death? Rotting stench and nothingness.
What should I do? Whatever will make you happy and/or live longer.

Most people today look to scientists, doctors, psychologists, or indeed any kind of ‘expert’ for something that will provide bearings for their being. The problem here is that empirical data, research and statistics, are all focused on the outer life, the health of the body and the chemistry of the mind. If this domain was adequate to the task, we would surely have nearly eliminated depression and mental illness, whereas we are clearly only seeing it rise.

This will not surprise those of us who have transcendent bearings for our being. How could the expansive possibilities of spirit not be distressed by the thought that all there is to being is what science tells us.

What can the latest research tell us about human fulfilment? Why does science know nothing about the ultimate fulfilment of being? Of the kind of creatures Lewis wrote about? Because science proceeds by a method that rules the reality of being out from the very beginning. Being is not found under a microscope or at the end of a telescope, it is not discovered via experiment, or abstracted into universal laws of predictive behaviour. Being seeks meaning not measurement, it desires intimacy and belonging not abstraction and theorising. It is the deep of the person, seen only by the eye of God and those who love. Science can’t help but ignore it. This is not a weakness of science but merely a comment on the nature of science. The problem is not with science but with the granting of absolute authority to science (and by association, technology).

C S Lewis, writing 60 years ago of his concerns regarding educational trends, spoke powerfully of “the trees of knowledge and life growing together” ...Lessons with blood and sap” (Lewis, Men without Chests, p.6)

The problem with lessons that have blood and sap is that it is so much more difficult measuring outcomes devised by a system that knows nothing about either. The danger of giving authority to such systems is that increasingly, we learn to teach without blood and sap. It is a gain for the system (which does not want and cannot compute anything as messy as blood and sap!) and a loss for humanity, who are essentially, creatures of blood and sap.

What happened to the Educational Authorities of Joy, Wisdom and Love?

In communities and classrooms where visible measures have gained ultimate authority, we will inevitably find a forsaken humanity; teachers with crushed spirits and dulled minds (and from my experience, broken hearts) and students in a kind of wasteland of assessment and meaningless information.

Rules and procedures can be so attractive. They take away the need to think about what we are doing. To understand why we are doing it. To become capable of something more than we currently are. In other words, they promise a short cut to salvation. "Better teaching", "improved learning". It's a modern form of magic. Just invest in some interactive white boards, some lap top computers, wireless your classrooms and poof, magically, the rabbit of understanding will come out of the hat!

Technology perpetuates passivity at its best and confusion at its worst (think Brave New World or 1984). Passivity prevents true encounter but promises spiritual fulfilment. It is a powerful lie. But it is a shortcut to a substitute. Wittgenstein once wrote: "if you use a trick in logic whom can you be tricking other than yourself" (*Culture and Value* 24).

Good teaching and real learning cannot be achieved with gimmicks and tricks, machines or measures. It will always depend on the mind and heart of the teacher and the learner undertaking the slow and difficult process of applying their minds with discipline in order to master material.

When it comes to asking questions about technology, I can think of no better advice than that given by the late Neil Postman. Here are the 6 questions he thinks we should ask before we introduce or adopt a new technology

1. What is the problem to which this technology is a solution?
2. Whose problem is it? (Will the people who pay for it be the people who have the problem? Concorde example)
3. What new problems will be created as a result of solving the old problem? (motor car, clocks and monks)
4. What people/institutions will be harmed by this technology? (Luddite example)
5. What language and communication will be changed by this technology?
6. Which people/institutions will gain new power through this technology (and which will decline i.e. how will it shift power and authority?)

We could apply these questions to interactive whiteboards, laptops, digitalising newsletters, even things as basic as templates for reports etc. (Online reporting is now apparently mandatory in the UK. Did anyone discuss or consider what the gains and losses of such a decision were going to be?) We could even ask these questions of the 'latest research'. You will be amazed at what is revealed about the actual effects of a decision like changing a reporting system which seemed so innocuous. Will we have Lutheran-like courage to stand by our findings?

We may not always be in a position to prevent the implementation of the technology but we can always attempt to understand (remain conscious about) the decision being made and its relevant impact on the question of Authority.

2. Self-Identity (Integrity/Conscience/Wisdom)

Our Gospel tells us that our fulfilment, our identity, the possibility of Life depends on acknowledging our Source, having a transcendent reference point which grants us our nature and our place in creation. Without this kind of inner bearing, when we are left in an egoistic, relativistic free-for-all, it is not surprising to find outer measures of control being imposed.

Hand in hand with the loss of transcendence and the rise of the technological is its psychological counterpart – modelling human beings on information processors. Resilience and well-being are the trendy new terms but take a look at the programs designed to help young people cope with the trials of life and you find documents full of mantras and slogans that do not invite or encourage depth of spirit or an encounter with being (imagine Jesus teaching 'BOUNCE BACK' to those suffering from a loss of meaning, from a sense of incompleteness, to the bullied and outcast and to those suffering from an inability to walk through life with a straight back.)

The rise of resilience, happiness, wellbeing, life skills programs is testament, I think, to an environment without bearings, without any sense of reality having a structure in which suffering can be meaningful and without any sense of spiritual purpose. The default position for a self that does not have a 'determining centre' or inner bearing, is the residual Freudian 'id', the anonymous 'it' that unleashes itself on the world, expecting to get its own way, expecting instant gratification, expecting to avoid all pain and unpleasantness. On the surface it can appear quite 'tolerant' and accepting. But inside it is often rigid and inflexible, and when given the opportunity, it shows its true colours.

It is no wonder that programs that promise direction and happiness proliferate. I consider these programs a classic example of taking a short cut to 'emotional salvation' and whilst they certainly can serve a purpose, they surely cannot provide the spirit with what it truly longs for. And an unforeseen consequence of applying outer measures (like mottos and mantras) to the inner life is that the authority shifts from the spiritual to the behavioural.

When outer measures gain control and Authority over inner ones, we deny being and devastate Identity.

Systems must serve something beyond themselves.

If we don't claim the Authority of the inner, we grant authority to the outer.

"If not within, then without".

3. Information as Communication

The proliferation of programs, the retreat of the deep self and the rise of ego chatter has gone hand in hand with the third person in this Unholy Trinity – the belief that information alone can solve problems. Now of course, information matters and it can be extremely useful but on its own, it does very little. For example, I cannot think of one major problem in the world today that is caused by a lack of information. The global economic meltdown, the Middle East crisis, global warming, terrorism, poverty and so on. None of these problems are caused by a lack of information and none will be solved by having more information.

As soon as language loses its connection with inner-meaning (and what other kind is there?), it becomes meaningless. There are two kinds of noise to be identified I think. The first is the chatter of distressed and fragmented identities, lost in the world of outer sense; the second is the rise of what I will call technological rhetoric. Both are manifestations of the disconnection from the anchor of the silence and authenticity that is characteristic of Being.

Neither offers the soul sustenance in the form of meanings to live in or the comfort of true communication, of being known, trusted, heard, understood and loved. The best example of

the first is the kind of ego-chatter you witness on reality TV shows and which was beautifully described by Thomas Merton who lamented the rise of noise and the loss of silent communication.

"Where men live huddled together without true communication, there seems to be greater sharing and a more genuine communion. But this is not communion, only immersion in the general meaninglessness of countless slogans and clichés repeated over and over again so that in the end one listens without hearing and responds without thinking...Each individual in the mass is insulated by thick layers of insensibility. He doesn't care, he doesn't hear, he doesn't think. He does not act, he is pushed. He does not talk; he produces conventional sounds when stimulated by the appropriate noises. He does not think, he secretes clichés.

Merton goes on:

"There is actually no more dangerous solitude than that of the man who is lost in a crowd, who does not know he is alone and who does not function as a person in a community either. Yet he is by no means free of care. He is burdened by the diffuse, the anonymous anxiety, the nameless fears, the petty itching lusts and the all pervading hostilities which fill mass society the way water fills an ocean". (Merton, *Seeds of Contemplation*, p.56-7)

Notice here Merton's description of the invisible world. On the outside all seems well. On the inside, quiet despair and chaos.

In a fractured world of data-overload and endless identity reconstruction, communication struggles to be authentic. Worse, authentic communication becomes threatening (have any of you dared ask of a curriculum document or a policy decision: 'what exactly does this mean?") John Ralston Saul argues that the sign of an operative ideology is that no-one asks what the language means, nor whether it makes sense or whether it is true.' Syntax masquerades as meaning. Obscurity suggests complexity. But what does it actually say and whom is this language supposed to serve?

Communication might properly be thought of as an exchange of personal meaning, not merely the posting or passing on of information which, in the digital realm, renders everyone anonymous. Information will not fix communication problems (to think like this is to imagine that in order to reveal himself all God needs to do is to send everyone in the world an email.)

When we fall for the lie that information can save us, we are complicit in shifting Authority from the Relational to the Impersonal. And we are well on our way to disconnecting our practices or traditions from the truths that give them Life.