

Study to be quiet

The 5th International Teachers' Conference
Thursday 9th July – Thursday 16th July 2015

Soon after arriving at ISA, I was offered the chance to attend a conference run by the Education Renaissance Trust in Italy, Bella Toscana to be more precise.

I was delighted. Tuscany is dear to my heart and a world away from Chelmsford, where, as a classroom teacher, I had most frequently been sent in the past for any CPD that I had been offered. I was immediately attracted to the theme of the conference; with the background of a Quaker education and many years of membership and eldership of a Quaker meeting, the opportunity to study quietly in the midst of the madness of modern life was immensely appealing. The picture on the programme was of stained glass image of Izaak Walton, author of *The Compleat Angler* (9 August 1593 – 15 December 1683) to be found in the Chapel of St John the Evangelist and the Fisherman Apostles in Winchester Cathedral which is visited by anglers from all over the world, an evocative invitation to lay down the burdens of everyday life and immerse ourselves in reflection. My friends and fellow teachers cynically mocked me, unimpressed by my ebullient effusions about how much I was learning in my new post. There was no doubt in their minds that I was off on a "jolly" and they did not expect me to learn anything useful in Chiantishire. However, I can truthfully say that this was the most fruitful and inspirational (both in the original, spiritual and the more general sense of the word) conference I have ever attended.

The Education Renaissance Trust helps to develop schools and assist teachers who put spirituality at the heart of teaching and The School of Philosophy, which is linked with St James' School, bases its educational ethos on the following principles: "A human is a being which exists on four levels: physical, mental emotional and spiritual. In childhood each of these levels is in a receptive, malleable condition. Just as children need nourishing physical food every day to ensure health and growth, so they need healthy nourishing food for the mind, heart and spirit every day. This is real education. And it will result in a productive responsible accomplished adult ready to take their place in society." (Gilbert Mane- teacher at John Colet School, Australia)

During the week, I was struck by the impact of these principles on the young people, alumni of St James', who joined us to help with cooking and general community-based living, including daily sessions of singing together. They were charming, generous and impressively focused in their approach. It was humbling to come across groups of the young, deep in meditation during the day as I, still infected with vestiges of outside madness, rushed about to get to various appointments. However, over the course of the week, we too, as teachers at the conference were immersed in the St James' principles, which are, in my view, just as valid for adults as they are for children.



Villa Boccella, Lucca, Italy

The end of the summer term is traditionally a moment for utter collapse, as teachers breathe a collective sigh of relief and emerge from emotional exhaustion, trails of paperwork, long hours of report-writing and room clearing to search for a convenient bolt hole. I have seen many lives crumble under the stress of it all and insurance industry data suggests stress is the biggest cause of staff absence save for maternity; an enormous issue for our schools. Simply in terms of acting as a decompression chamber for teachers, the conference at Lucca was invaluable. The impact on the quality of education for our children of good and constant staff pupil relationships has been demonstrated in academic research. To quote just one example, Public Health England's report of November 2014 highlighted the link between pupil health and wellbeing and attainment and affirmed that "Positive relationships between teachers and pupils, and between pupils, are critical in promoting pupil wellbeing and encouraging them to avoid risky behaviour." I would be interested in attempting to quantify the effect of the conference at Villa Boccella on countless children's lives; a stress-free teacher is an invaluable resource.

Thursday 9th July began with some considerable stress. It started at 6:30 am with a fearful fight to get through the formidable rigours of Stansted airport. I suffered the indignity of a bag search due to an inappropriately placed i-pad and forgotten eye drops and after negotiating an insane scramble of people, I was just in time to catch my flight- which then took off...an hour late. This was followed by the predictable experience of feeling like a sardine and gingerly consuming plastic-flavoured croissants. Modern life at its best?

Mercifully, I was met in Pisa by Kim Brown exuding Tuscan warmth, and then transported, as if through a portal to another world, to the heavenly Villa Boccella to join fellow professionals from around the world casting off the pall of world-weariness carried by all teachers at the end of term. The feeling of immersion in a total experience of the senses was immediate: incessant cicadas, the scent of lemon trees and citronella, disparate sounds of frog calls and of bells from the villages, the restful views over hills bedecked in olive groves and fig trees merged harmoniously after a couple of hours in a salt pool. The villa itself was a mellow, comfortable as well as gracious home which flung wide its windows and doors in a metaphorically motherly embrace.

Each day of the conference began at 6:30 am with meditation, and silence was woven into the day, culminating in a final meditation session at 6:00 p.m. This felt like coming home; a rich experience of "centring down" (Quaker term) and just being in the moment. I realised how much I had missed this and how much depth that experience of stillness gives to the day. It is possible to distill what you are learning in those quiet spaces, to absorb, reflect and make sense. I have felt that still intensely since returning home and have loved just sitting quietly under the trees on Saffron Walden Common or letting myself be a human being rather than a human doing at the end of a working day: this is a supreme lesson to give to our children, true learning for life.

At 8:00 sharp every morning we gathered in the studio in an outside barn to begin Quiet Time. This was generally thoughtfully inspired by Margot Camp's PowerPoint of Greek statues and meditations on Beauty. It was so good to hear the saying that "beauties of body are as nothing to the beauties of soul" in a world obsessed by outward appearance. Paul Moss also led some of these sessions with felicitous readings from the Bible. The theme of the conference was drawn from St Paul's letter to the Thessalonians "but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more; And that ye study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you; That ye may walk honestly toward them that are without, and that ye may have lack of nothing" and he also made good use of Matthew Chapter 6 "Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" - an apposite reminder to live in the moment.

The "quiet hour" which followed these communally reflective sessions was spent in solitary reflection: reading in a spot in the gardens, walking up through the olive grove into a space created by an avenue of pines which felt like an open air cathedral- collective worship with a difference- or just sitting on a bench feeling the warmth on our skins. I have often been struck by the daily scramble to achieve and compete- I am writing this on a train journey which began in rush hour madness at 6.30 am- and the negative impact of this on my ability to do anything truly productive. Withdrawing and reflecting pays dividends far beyond the immediate respite.

Serious study at Villa Boccella began at 9:00 a.m. with educational philosophy, back to first principles... This is the very stuff of education- what are we doing and why? How often do we as teachers stop to think with serious intent about these things? Yet, if we don't examine the definition, goals and meaning of education periodically, we fall prey to the prevailing winds which in many cases do not do the term education much credit. **"Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom."** (Russell, B., 1912, p. 91) The opportunity to break the "tyranny of custom" would I feel sure be welcomed by many schools consumed in the hurly burly of daily life.

I chose to study Platonic philosophy, something I have always had a yen to master. But would I have ever sat down and read "The Republic" off my own bat in the times which I have away from the pressures of work? The probability is frankly not very high; even my (famously intellectual) book club has never got stuck into ancient Greek thought.



At Villa Boccella, there was a unique opportunity to debate philosophical issues with people from around the world, including Heads, Educational Psychologists and "on the ground" practising teachers. Plato deals with the ideal which will never be manifest, except (intermittently) in the human being. He speaks of the excellence within which must be brought out through education. The early education of mind and character is vital in Platonic thinking because what is learnt when young leaves a permanent mark. Plato encourages us to educate children to develop their inner Guardian; Guardianship is the most aspirational position in the Platonic Republic. The qualities of the Guardian are a philosophic disposition, high spirits, speed and strength. Plato believes that we should implant these in children from a young age with the careful use of stories and that we can nurture the Virtues- temperance, courage, wisdom and justice- through proper education. The value of the inner Guardian was thrown into stark relief in discussion with Rehanna, an extraordinarily courageous nun, providing education to girls in Islamabad, in the teeth of threats from the Taliban. Rehanna has started a School of Philosophy in Pakistan, promoting understanding between Christians and Muslims. The ability to reason in a detached way has helped her survive the most difficult of circumstances; I will never forget her quiet strength or the pictures she showed me of the nuns from her sister school, sitting on chairs in the rubble of their destroyed buildings, determinedly and doggedly declaring the right of women to an education.

Other Platonic gems included the discussion of Plato's conviction of the importance of beauty to the child "the object of education is to teach us to love what is beautiful"; a perfect justification of the value of Arts Education which was music to my ears and Socrates' dialogue with Crito which raised the issue of true Justice with the important question: am I a just person and does that affect the soul? The conclusion was reached that what is at stake is being true to the self, interestingly an idea we chose to value highly in the school where I worked for many years, with a consequent dramatic impact on the self-esteem of even the least confident of our charges.

10.30 am at Villa Boccella...study resumed after coffee with a diverse mix of 66 teachers from around the world. The opportunity to meet with a range of interesting characters from South Africa, Australia, Trinidad, Southern India and of course London was a huge privilege and one of the greatest blessings of the conference. Strong friendships were forged and developed over delicious vegetarian fayre and (yes I have to admit) chianti; it was this fellowship, such a strong feature of ISA, which undoubtedly enhanced and deepened the quality of our study, as well, of course as strengthening international understanding and cohesion. No place for international divisions here.

The study sessions which lasted most of the day (with a break in the middle because of the heat) allowed us to become immersed in the joys of properly directed reading and discussion, which in itself was of enormous benefit; to remember what it is to be a student again must surely make us more empathetic to our pupils and more sensitive to the process of learning. It is at least 15 years since I have had this experience in studying for my MEd and it brought my love of learning sharply to the fore. How glorious to sit in a library with a range of intelligent people and debate. The fact that the Tuscan hills and the mellow sound of bells provided the backdrop just enhanced the joy of this. I thought myself in my personal heaven. **As resident Drama Queen, I chose to study Greek literature with its rich vein of dramatic storytelling.** From the epic tales of the Iliad and the Odyssey, through the erotic poetry of Sappho and the visceral dramas of Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles to the more detached historical reasoning of Thucydides and Herodotus, we explored the riches of our civilisation's literary heritage, each of us inspired to go back into schools and share the passion and enthusiasm generated by Margot Camp's expertise. Ofsted and ISI both recognise that good teaching should include high levels of expertise and subject knowledge; there is no substitute for deep knowledge and enthusiasm in the classroom. I certainly felt empowered by the sense of mastery of literature I gained over the week and know from personal experience of working with seven year olds the transforming power of Greek literature in the classroom. Back to Plato; stories matter. The context of the Greek debt crisis added certain piquancy to our studies; culture is fragile and needs protecting, a lesson currently being played out in Syria.

Other folk could choose to study Art, Geometry or Sanskrit. The Art group, taught by the gentle and encouraging Ali Yanya, spent many hours observing and reinterpreting our beautiful surroundings, time to hone and practise skills long buried in many cases; the growth in confidence was marked. The Art exhibition at the end of the week was stunning, reflecting hours of thoughtful study and clear progress over the week.

I initially thought that geometry sounded like "the boring option". How wrong was I. Tom Bree's passion for the subject was utterly riveting and as he explained the extraordinary patterns inherent in nature and made them manifest with his wrapt students, I was literally awe-struck with the power of these geometrical explorations. Again, the exhibition of work at the end of the week was glorious and indicative of the hours of engrossed labour spent in the villa's dining area. I am now embarrassed that I ever thought that geometry was boring and feel that even I, messy and awkward as I am with mathematical instruments, could convey the power and potential of this subject to my students.

The opportunity to study Sanskrit was, I think, unique. St James' school is the only school in the country to teach Sanskrit. Warwick and Elena Jessup obviously brought this subject to life for their students; we were all entertained by a spirited retelling of an ancient Sanskrit myth at the end of the week and intrigued by the teachings of the oneness of everything. Warwick also conveyed the importance of the teacher in the teachings of the Sanskrit Upanisads and the centrality of relationships between teachers and students, opening our minds to the potential contribution of other cultures to educational philosophy and debate- true educational tolerance; I am sorry not to have had the chance to take this study further- next time perhaps?

On the last night we were entertained by Audrey Mazibuko, fully regaled in traditional Zulu costume, a marvellously celebratory end to our week. On an ordinary day, Audrey is a Headteacher in a Masibambane College in Orange Farm, an enormous township situated about 50km south of Johannesburg, South Africa. With great pride, Audrey had told us the fascinating story of her school and life in her community with its everyday stresses and strains and opened our eyes to education in a very different context from that of most of our schools. Here, she was free to be herself, to be "in the moment" and reflect.

I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to attend this magical event in the magical setting of the hills outside Lucca with so many magical people. I feel that what I gained from it, though unquantifiable in any statistical sense, was 'a pearl beyond price'. As Deborah Leek- Bailey commented, there is nowhere else in the independent sector offering training of this sincerity and depth.



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