

Conclusion

The art of balancing: in the daily grind – a teacher’s welfare

In his poem *Ulysses*, Tennyson muses on the burden of leadership: ‘... I mete and dole unequal laws unto a savage race, that hoard and sleep and feed and know not me ...’. He then suggests, however, that:

‘... some work of noble note may yet be done.
Tho’ much is taken, much abides, and tho’ we are not now that strength which
In old days moved heaven and earth ...’¹

I read this as a teacher (not, of course, that we manage and lead a ‘savage race’!). We can all remember that first and early vigour, energy, enthusiasm and motivation at the start of our teaching career. As the years progress, we may sometimes feel (like Tennyson) that ‘much is taken ...’ and that ‘... we are not now that strength which in the old days moved heaven and earth ...’. ‘Much is taken ...’ over the days, months and years. There is the natural stress of it all, what Shakespeare’s Hamlet calls ‘The thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to ...’²

It is the wearing down of it all. Whenever I talk with non-teachers about our profession, they invariably raise our ‘short hours’, our ‘fantastic holidays’(!). How many times have we had to ‘defend’ those misconceptions? If they only knew, (although I am sure many of the parents of our more challenging students know how demanding it is spending a third of one’s waking day with their children.)

Teaching is a rewarding profession – no question; it is also very demanding, taxing and naturally requires multi-tasking. The *natural* stress of relating to many

1. Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1842) wrote the poem *Ulysses*. This poem is, of course, about Odysseus and his journeying back to Ithaca (his kingdom) after the fall of Troy. I have taken poetic (and metaphorical) licence with the poem. Ulysses is the Latinised name for Homer’s Odysseus.

2. In *Hamlet*: in the most well-known of his soliloquies, Act 3:1: 62.

children with varying needs, and to have the professional responsibility for their educational development, also occasion our *natural* concern. Most teachers have significant goodwill, generosity of spirit, commitment to each of their children *beyond* their formal role as teacher. It is always that aspect of the teacher–student relationship that children remember as reflective adults; that their teachers cared.

Teaching is a profession that can eat up the margins of our lives; there is *always* more we can do. It is also crucial – however – that we consider our personal welfare – within our role. We need to do this not out of mere self-interest but because it is necessary; it is right. Getting a *reasonable* balance between the formal demands of our role and those demands we place on ourselves as teachers. Then there are the elements we need to balance between work, home, family ... this is not easy.

In his book *The Road Less Travelled*³, the psychiatrist Scott-Peck (1990) notes that ‘Balancing is the discipline that gives us flexibility. Extraordinary flexibility is required for successful living’ (p. 66).

We have to ‘balance’; we have no choice – that is the very nature of our living and work. To enhance a healthier, more realistic ‘balance’, we need to revisit areas of personal, relational and professional needs from time to time.

- We *need* our ‘holidays’. We need time for body, mind and soul to repair, to recreate. This is – in part – what is meant by *recreation*.
- We need time for personal professional reflection as well as collegial reflection on what we do as teachers. Teaching is a *busy* profession – we need to value, and make time for, personal and collegial reflection.

In working with colleagues in colleague mentoring, we have had extremely valuable discussions based on mutual classroom ‘observation’ and feedback in team-teaching sessions. An opportunity for professional self-awareness in a climate of elective professional trust. How many times do we ask ‘How aware am I of my *characteristic* behaviour as a teacher? *Non-judgemental* peer mentoring can enable such reflection and growth as a teacher (Rogers, 2002a).

- An interesting hypothetical question we sometimes ponder is: ‘Would I like to be a student in a class where I was the teacher?’ Bad day notwithstanding!
- We need to ‘let off steam’ from time to time, without vilifying, shafting or maliciously labelling our students. Staffroom ‘off-loading’ is healthy, necessary; it is a form of ‘moan-bonding’. Sometimes the off-loading is enough; at other times, it needs to move towards reflection, analysis and action. One of the least helpful comments in a staffroom is ‘I don’t have a problem with ... (a particular student or class).’ This is a deflating comment. Even if true, it hardly helps the colleague who is struggling with Jason, or 6B, or 8D. Further, it is likely to inhibit a colleague seeking necessary support. We can be quite self-recriminating as a profession (honest self-reflection and willingness to change is

3. *The Road Less Travelled* (1990) by M. Scott-Peck, published by Hutchinson and Co., London.

different). We have our bad days, sometimes very bad days. We do not effectively always reach every child; we reach many. We have learned not to blame – or berate – ourselves for what we cannot do.

- We naturally whinge and complain in our profession (student behaviour, *some* parents, our workload, ‘The Department’ ...). There is a big difference between the ‘whinge’ that makes things worse, the dissenting and the divisive whingeing, and that ‘whinge’ that affirms, alerts, acknowledges and can lead to something *we* can do about it. I rather like the term I have heard in some schools: ‘moan-bonding’. After all, the etymology of whinge is effectively the combination of whining and cringing; ‘moan-bonding’ sounds more positive.
- Frustration and anger are natural; at times they are healthy and *right*. It is right, it is just to get angry at significant injustice, intolerance, abuse, bullying, racism, sexism ... As teachers, we have had to learn to communicate our anger constructively. To assert and not aggress. Sometimes, it is right to assert unambiguously in ‘the emotional moment’; at other times, we may need to restrain ourselves, have cool-off time and then make our point clearly and calmly. There is a balance, even in our communication of anger. The *feeling* of anger never tells us what to *do*. The communication of anger with some clarity and justice is a learned behaviour. It is an element of will, and skill, that can be learned (p. 161–65).
- At times we will *feel* helpless, we will *feel* a failure. There are times we will feel momentarily helpless. There is no shame in this – it, too, is normal. *Feeling* a failure does not mean we *are* a failure, it does mean we have failed *in a given instance*. Forgiving ourselves (and others) is crucial in contrast to ‘mentally kicking ourselves’ and indulging in recurrent self-blame (pp. 9, 120).
- Colleague support is a significant factor in ‘keeping the balance’, particularly when we feel stretched, confused, unfocused, worn down by it all. The moral support of our colleagues – those in the ‘same boat’ – is consistently noted in the research as highly valued (Rogers, 2002a)⁴. As basic as a shared coffee, a word of reassurance, the note in the pigeon-hole, the flowers when you have been away sick, a colleague taking a difficult child to their class for 10–15 minutes to give you (and your class) a breather, through to the off-loading, moan-bonding and to those times of shared planning and problem-solving.
One primary school’s in-house norm is that ‘the difficult student in our school is a difficult student for all’. Contrast this with the staffroom comment, ‘Do you know what *your* Jason did in the playground!?’ Our colleagues can and do encourage, affirm, assure. At times, though, we will have to ask for support from our colleagues because they may not ‘know’.
- It is important to remember that there are many factors we cannot control in

4. I Get By With a Little Help (2002) by B. Rogers, published by A.C.E.R. Press, Melbourne.

our profession, within the children's home environment: family dysfunction; substance abuse; neglect; poor diet; structural poverty; long-term unemployment ... When we focus on what *we* can do at *our* school, the natural stress is more realistically focused. Nor can we control 'the Department' and its mandates. We can control *our response as a school* to 'the Department'; we can decide what we will do, where we can do it – *in our school, in our class, with our students*. We can manage external mandates rather than merely letting them manage us!

- A crucial factor in 'the balance of it all' is paying some attention to our personal physical health, and the reasonably basic things we can do. Even a basic walking routine several times a week, the fruit, veggies and water will help (we all know what we should be doing *most* of the time!)

In Shakespeare's Henry VI, there is a passage that (to me) nicely sums up this 'balance' of time, work, recreation and rest:

To carve out dials ... thereby to see the minutes – how they run. How many makes the hour full complete. How many hours bring about the day. How many days will finish up the year ...
 So many hours must I tend my flock.
 So many hours must I take my rest.
 So many hours must I contemplate.⁵

These lines could almost have been written for a teacher. We needs must balance time over 'our flock', 'our rest', even 'our contemplation'.

We do our best, then, to balance the natural stresses and demands of our profession and the normal 'wear and tear':

'that which we are, we are; one equal temper of heroic hearts, Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will, To strive, to seek, to find and not to yield'
 (Tennyson, *Ulysses*).

How many days till the end of term?

5. Shakespeare 3 Henry VI II. v. 24–40.