



## **A strange debt of gratitude**

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It might seem ungrateful that I have only returned here once, for Jackie Lambton's funeral, since I left in June 1970; gross ingratitude, perhaps, considering that it is here that I experienced the first incident of my life that I can remember. If we walked around these buildings I could show you the position of every bed in every dormitory that I slept in, I could tell you the position of every table that I dined at, and the position of every desk in every classroom where I was taught. I can show you where I sat in the chapel, which was my favourite space. It is here that I learned to read and write which have turned out to be the two greatest educational gifts of my life; the library, of which I read every book, being my second favourite space. I can remember the exact spot where I was standing when I heard that Burnley had won the Football League Championship in 1960. I can remember exactly where I was when I heard my first, frowned upon, Beatles record; and of course I can remember where I savoured my first, strictly forbidden, kiss. And it was here where the pattern of my Christian life was so deeply etched that for good, and in some ways for ill, I have never erased it: the good is my pattern of Christian witness at home, in church and in the community; the bad is the guilt-ridden burden imposed by pre Vatican II Catholicism. My wife Margaret often remarks, with some truth, that I have never escaped from the nuns; and never will; and that was at a time when it was difficult to calculate which order was the most severe, our Sisters of Charity or the neighbouring Broughton Hall Sisters of Mercy whom I encountered as a student at Cardinal Allen when I began to be interested in girls.

I can only plead in mitigation that we have to reach a certain time of life, in my case quite late, before we begin to be seriously interested in our childhood. For decades, I have to say, I neither felt grateful nor resentful; indeed, I didn't feel anything but, for all the ups and downs, the praise and the blame, the achievements and the disappointments, to return now is an act of gratitude, with the intention of passing on a lifetime's experience in the visual impairment sector, to say something about the present and the future of our blind and partially sighted children.

Until the appearance of retinopathy of prematurity in the late 1940s, as the result of the invention of the incubator, the community response to blindness was deeply stratified. I say "blindness" because partial sight, as a visual and therefore as an educational phenomenon, was not recognised until after the Second World War. The stratification split blind children into academics and, literally, basket cases. But the incubator brought with it a whole crop of blind children who either came from countries with national health systems or children whose parents could afford private health care; these were the only two ways you could get a baby into an incubator. At the same time, the massive post War investment of the US Veterans Administration brought, among other things, long cane technique and the Perkins Braille. Suddenly, there were a large number of blind children with a very wide spectrum of abilities and, in the 1950s, the system began to recognise partial sight and the phenomenon of enlarged print.

In the era before the Second World War blind children graduated into professions such as law and the Church, with a few becoming physiotherapists, while, at the other side of the divide, there were sheltered workshops where inmates, lacking hand-eye co-ordination, made poor quality, uneconomic weaving products, mostly

baskets and brooms, with a few ambitious souls making it into clerical work, particularly after the “discovery” that touch typing was an option. Because some children with retinopathy of prematurity were particularly bright, they presented a problem to a residential system which had poor expectations of its children. The only option for secondary education were the two Church of England residential Grammar schools of Worcester College for boys and Chorleywood College for Girls; but the nuns simply could not contemplate sending us into such hot beds of heresy, so they turned to the model of mainstreaming practised in the United States. And so at the age of ten I learned to touch type; and went to the Cardinal Allen Grammar School at least a full academic year behind my sighted peers, more so in mathematics for which I had used the primeval Taylor frame and stylus and frame. Incidentally, I was recently shocked to see that the Taylor frame is still being used in developing countries!

And as I progressed in my secondary school I became ever more aware of the broad spectrum of ability among my visually impaired peers and their bleak prospects in adult life. There were special FE and so-called rehabilitation establishments; but nobody much, among the children or teachers, talked about getting a job; and most of them didn't. And, indeed, if you look round the board room table at RNIB where all but one of the Trustees is either blind or partially sighted, only one of us is in a full-time job; the rest of us, including me, are portfolio people. Two decades ago if you looked round the same table you would have seen lawyers and university lecturers, mostly products of ROP, but today that generation is almost at an end. After sixty years of relative failure - employment for blind school leavers has never been much above 30%, even in the area of sheltered employment - during a period of almost uninterrupted economic boom, we are faced with four intersecting phenomena:

- The ability demographic of congenital and paediatric blindness and partial sight is now heavily tilted towards multiple disability, frequently with a marked cognitive challenge
- The shift from big government and big industry to the SME complicates employment placement and makes it much more expensive
- A global market in skills and capital makes long-term employment much less certain; and
- Automation has cut out huge swathes of employment open to people of modest ability.

If we look for a moment at these last two phenomena, the global skills and capital market and automation, we can immediately see what they have done to what were, at one time, occupations reserved for blind people: telephony has been automated; craft work has gone to developing countries; it is much cheaper to import Eastern European physiotherapists than to train them here; and the scope for secretarial office work has drastically shrunk with the ridiculous and highly uneconomic phenomenon of senior executives doing their own email and keeping their own diaries.

So what we need is a fundamentally different approach to blind and partially sighted children and young adults to prepare them for adult life. I will set this out in three topics:

- The National Curriculum and formal education
- Confronting Postmodernism
- The jobs market.

So, first, the National Curriculum and formal education.

To understand where we are now, we have to recall how we got here. When I went to Cardinal Allen Grammar School in 1963 two years after the first Saint Vincent's boy, Vincent Sherlock, was mainstreamed, this caused a massive civil war in the visual impairment sector which has still not completely subsided. At the time, RNIB violently opposed mainstreaming and it took a great deal of nerve for the people here to stick to their guns. Then in 1981 the Warnock Commission found in favour of mainstreaming as the default although I suspect this was yet another case, like Care in The Community, of doing the right thing for the wrong reason; Mrs. Thatcher was much more interested in budget cuts than doing the right thing for blind children. The logical consequence of the mainstreaming case was to accept the adoption by all blind and partially sighted children without a statement of the whole National Curriculum; after all, if you claimed that all children, regardless of their impairment, should be treated the same, that meant that all children should pursue the National Curriculum unless there were egregious special factors, such as serious multiple impairment, pointing to exemption.

Now it does not take a genius to work out why this has been catastrophic. Our children must always pursue three curricula:

- The standard, National Curriculum
- The additional curriculum of communications skills (braille, special notation etc.) and orientation and mobility; and
- The “hidden curriculum” of social interaction.

It almost goes without saying that most elements in the National Curriculum are more difficult for our children to acquire than is the case for their sighted peers. And so, inevitably, in a professionally pinched and utilitarian ecology, the earliest thing to go by the wayside is play. Maths presents particular problems not only for children but for a special education profession which hardly has the capacity to deliver the subject. Then the acquisition of braille and/or orientation and mobility eats up more time which sighted peers are devoting to other things, not least leisure and personal development. Sighted children, after all, don't have to learn the rules and signs for contracted braille and they don't need orientation and mobility training.

With this crowded and not very pleasant life, it is hardly surprising that after play and personal development have been side-lined, the “hidden curriculum” just isn't delivered so that even the most academically qualified blind school leavers don't know what to do with their heads and their hands, don't know how to conform and rebel in dress, and don't know how to gauge the reaction of the silent other to what they are saying. People who can see know what to do with their heads and their hands, know how to conform and rebel in dress and can see when they've said something a little sharp, the reaction they have caused, so they know whether to go on or to moderate; the reputation that many blind people have for being arrogant or tactless (including me) results from this inability to gauge reaction and also, quite often, it stems from being in the company of people who don't end pronouncements decisively which leads to accusations of interruption. I might say that when I was here I learned braille although I could read newspapers by getting my nose black, and when I lost my residual vision after university I went to a film producer friend to be taught about what to do with my head and my hands. I have always, since then, been acutely aware of conformity and idiosyncrasy in dress; but there are still times when I make mistakes by being too direct in my speech; and there are occasions when, in spite of training and experience, I still accidentally interrupt a bumbler.

There are, I think, some important conclusions to draw from this discussion:

First, the National Curriculum, as it applies to blind and partially sighted children, has turned out to be little short of disastrous, not least because there has been teaching profession denial, if not collusion in a failed delivery system; and now the situation is about to become much worse with the insistence of a Maths GCSE as part of the university requirement, even for arts courses. I say again that, particularly in the mainstream environment, even if children can learn maths, there isn't anybody to teach them. This is going to be a tough reversal to bring about but we really must try. The world doesn't need everybody to be a qualified mathematician any more than it needs everybody to be a qualified visual artist; but that's the current convention. If we are not careful almost all of our children will be shut out of further and higher education; and, much worse in our particular context, children of modest achievement might not even be considered for basic employment without a maths GCSE.

Secondly, we have to face up to the fact that many highly qualified blind people do not get a job because their social skills are not good enough. Too much concentration on academic competence and utilitarian functioning narrows down the prospects of good social engagement. Sometimes this can't be helped: many years ago now I was asked to be the “Lobby Correspondent” on Channel 4's The People's Parliament which involved me conducting ad hoc interviews with Members of that Parliament during breaks in the debate. Getting around and doing rapid pieces with strangers was difficult enough but the killer was when we had completed four programmes the producer wanted me to do my introductory pieces to camera where I had to learn a short script and deliver it directly facing the camera. We shot and shot but it didn't seem to work. A few days later the producer phoned to say it wouldn't work; he was puzzled, sympathetic, but definite. Somebody else would have to front the programme. I was heartbroken but it didn't stop me thinking. My

conclusion was that in pieces to camera people could see me full on, including my pair of artificial eyes; they didn't know what was wrong but they knew that something was not quite right. "Perhaps he's on drugs", they might have thought, "or a bit mad". But the point is, by the time they had either found the answer or stopped worrying what the answer was, they had totally missed what I had said.

So there are some circumstances in which we can't totally overcome blindness, and it's best to know as precisely as we can, what these situations are; but much of what we get wrong is inexcusable: everybody should be taught to hold their head properly, to smile and look sad appropriately, to gauge what can be seen and not seen so that scratching is discreet, to dress appropriately, whether to conform or to make a personal heterodox statement.

Thirdly, If I am right about this second point then something has to give and, largely, it has to be formalist curriculum which does not improve the life chances of the young person.

And here we reach the central point of the education discussion: the main point of education is to improve the life chances of the individual as an individual and as a social person. If the Government thinks that a necessary precondition of improving life chances is to achieve a GCSE in English and Maths it might be right in most cases; but it should not be allowed to employ a crude formula to over-ride a more careful analysis of improving life chances. It's difficult enough being blind with three curricula to follow without a hectoring Government, supposedly committed to choice, telling educators what they must do to maximise the life chances of those in their care.

And there's a perfectly good example of risking upsetting people but not knowing it; so in case there are any committed Tories in the room, I'll stop there except to say that the root philosophical problem is the confusion between treating people equally and identically; the former is a key educational principle, the latter is Stalinist and highly dangerous to society and damaging to individuals.

So let me turn now to the rather daunting heading of confronting postmodernism.

One of the reasons why there has been an even more marked rift between young people and their elders, but not necessarily betters, is that society has undergone a massive change in the last 20 years which is evident in popular culture but not articulated there. In this respect it's important to distinguish between routine teenage boundary exploration and something more profound. In Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*<sup>i</sup> an old shepherd complains (III.3.): "I would there were no age between sixteen and three-and-twenty, or that youth would sleep out the rest; for there is nothing in the between but getting wenches with child, wronging the ancients." And we all remember, no doubt, how we rebelled in the days of Elvis Presley and beyond into the Beatles era; who would have thought that a coffee bar or long hair could be subversive. Anyhow, what we are looking at now is not at all like that.

Roughly from the fall of the Bastille in 1789 to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, markers not to be taken too seriously but given as an aide memoire, generations succeeded each other in the modernist age of mass production and two world wars which were, in essence, the horrific consequence of modernism. The characteristics of this two century socio-economic era were:

- Capital aggregation and investment
- Mass production
- Occupational and social stratification and conformity.

If we walked down a street for most of that 200 years we could tell by simply looking at people what their occupation was, and their social standing. People stayed in one organisation, making their way, if they were lucky, steadily up the ladder. In the office you could gauge status from location in a building and the quality and size of the carpeting on the floor; out of the work place people lived in very deeply defined social boundaries and rarely managed to “climb” in a single generation, although the “climb” between generations was quite marked, particularly after each World War.

The key social skill was, therefore, conformity. People had to know how to behave within an occupation and class. Now if we focus on blind and partially sighted people, it's easy to see how, in spite of difficulties, conformity was possible. Occupation set class and determined what people could and could not afford to buy: clothes, food and, closer to the end of modernity, cars and foreign holidays were all consumed within relatively narrow boundaries.

Well, it's almost over now. In the 21st Century the rapid decline of the state has begun in earnest, speeded slightly by the 2008 crash but, in any case, inevitable; and although there are massive global corporations like Apple and Coca-Cola, the new economic ecology is a seething mass of small and medium sized enterprises. But there is one more critical factor which will deeply affect our education policy and our life chances, even though the Government, driven by the poisonous Daily Mail, refuses to recognise this.

The new age, which for convenience sake we will call the postmodern, rests on the capacity of every individual not only to consume but also to produce, to publish, to establish a self-defined identity and broadcast it. To be a conformist consumer is no longer good enough. Ever since the beginning of the digital age we have taught our children how to access digital information but we've been much slower to teach them how to create it. If you ask educators about the internet for blind people they will tell you about the accessibility guidelines on consuming data but not on the accessibility guidelines for producing it. It isn't so much publish and be damned as don't publish and be dead! The education system in general and ours in particular just hasn't come to terms with this massive change. The use of social media isn't a peripheral play activity to be contrasted with serious learning; the play with and manipulation of data is the determinant of life chances in the 21st Century.

But the fundamental problem for us is that this kind of socio economic plasticity is peculiarly difficult for blind and partially sighted people to handle; conforming was tough but this is much tougher. How do we teach a child to establish its own identity? Isn't there some kind of paradox in teaching non-conformity? How can we exercise a duty of care and also encourage a child to rebel? For sighted children, learning to read is the gateway to rebellion, for blind children it's part of conformity, so the gap between the two cohorts of children widens. We are going to have to think long and hard about this.

Thirdly, before drawing some conclusions about what all this means for what we do here, let me say something about the future jobs market, taking into account all that I have said so far.

It's important for me to qualify my own postmodern rhetoric by saying that it won't happen immediately. After all, there are still manufacturing and civil service jobs in big organisations, and we will all want to buy clothes and eat in fast food restaurants, invest in a pension and open a bank account, but we need to think back to what I said earlier; at one end of the spectrum, there is a global market in skills and no amount of immigration policy is going to change that. The price of Asian graduates, particularly in the field of maths and science, makes a nonsense of our strictures on maths in the curriculum. The same goes for engineering. There's a mantra over here that we don't have enough engineers and chemists; but there's really no problem. They are the skills that countries with a conformist bent tend to go for. China and India are vastly short of people with creative talent, but that's all right because heterodox democracies provide that; it's our USP we know what happens to Chinese artists; and even democratic India has very narrow creative and cultural horizons. So the global market for technical and professional skills will profoundly affect home grown graduate talent; and, in spite of the mantras of the ancient, we will have to adapt our universities to provide degrees in precisely the areas which the Government and the *Daily Mail* really hate. The butt of their criticism, strangely in the case of newspapers, is media studies, but we must ask ourselves how much media we consume and how much we spend on it compared with our grandparents. When people buy smart phones and tablets, computers, digital satellite television and games consoles, where's the disgrace or irrelevance in media studies? Anyway, the point here is that it won't be very easy for even our most skilled blind people to compete in the technical and professional global market but there will be plenty of room in the creative space.

The key concept in the creative space, as far as I am concerned, is the idea of minor variation that cannot be automated.

I never tire of calling upon Margaret Boden's<sup>ii</sup> analysis of creativity to make the point. Some few people, like Shakespeare or Beethoven, are creatively explosive and transformative but most of us are creative through developing minor variations on themes. Soap opera, sitcom, chat shows, phone-ins, criticism, quizzes, reality TV, pop music, romantic fiction, fashion, cooking, landscape gardening, architecture, humour, crime fiction, window design and myriads of other activities all depend upon creating variations of standard templates; and most of us can aspire to that.





Let me give you just three examples:

- A fast food restaurant and, even more so, a conference catering company, supplies a small, predictable menu which it varies now and again. Cooking and serving this menu cannot be automated and doesn't require a Maths GCSE!
- Wine, whiskey or food tasting relies upon accumulated experience but there are only a limited set of variations to be considered
- Disc jockeys may receive a box full of new songs every week but being a disc jockey doesn't alter all that much from year to year.

There are countless other examples of this. The important thing is to find out very early in a blind child's development in which direction the creative talent is headed. The outcome we want is to maximise the talent and to generate a career which is as resistant to change as it can be. There's a late 20th Century theory that what we really want is to develop generic skills which can be applied as the world changes. Like the National Curriculum, this is great in theory but its' not so clever in practice for blind and partially sighted young people.

Finally, I want to turn to the implications of what I have said for what we do here, right on this spot:

I want to make six points:

- First, as I hope I have shown, the current curricular settlement just won't do; use all legal means to minimise its operation and campaign to get it modified
- Secondly, spend much more time on the personal development of individual children and young people, emphasising the ability to produce and project identity as well as the ability to behave properly and conform where this is necessary
- Thirdly, we can't start vocational spotlighting soon enough. It isn't a matter of "what do you want to do when you grow up" but watching what children will naturally gravitate towards. We need to spend much more time watching children and much less time bossing them about!
- Fourthly, every child needs a vocational team covering skills and investment; this means asking all kinds of questions about what we mean by teacher and vocational officer
- Fifthly, this asks us all kinds of questions about the dialogue we have with outside parties like industry and commerce, social investment, venture capital, chambers of commerce and entrepreneurs
- And, finally, this will probably force us to take a good, hard, and fundamental look at how we govern ourselves.

I hope you have found this stimulating; and hope you will feel that the effort that was put into me all those years ago has turned out to be worthwhile. It will be nice to put something back.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Winter's\\_Tale](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Winter's_Tale)

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<sup>ii</sup> Boden, Margaret A.: Creativity and Artificial Intelligence, *Artificial Intelligence* 203 (1998), 347-356