

The Two Halves of Our ‘Little Lives’

I first heard Richard Rohr’s ‘two halves’ thesis on CD while travelling from London to Belfast to see a friend there. I almost missed the plane wandering the departure lounge so gripped was I by what I was hearing! Since then I have continued to meditate on what the ‘two halves’ concept might mean for me in my situation. As a school teacher in London teaching Mathematics to students aged 11 - 18, one summary sentence immediately rang true in terms of my pedagogical practice: “Paul takes countless chapters in Romans to say what the Dalai Lama says in one sentence: ‘you must learn the law *very* well, in order to know how to break it properly.” Although they are too young to have moved into the true second half of life at this age, I believe that there is a sense in which the theory ‘works’ for the life-cycle of students’ time at school, and this has led me to think that the move from law-learning to extra-judicial life is one that occurs in other mini-cycles within our lives too.

Young students coming to my classes need strict boundaries. I insist on their workbooks having ruled margins 4 squares in from each page. All titles must be underlined, and work must be dated. Homework must be handed in in a particular place at a very particular time, and there are clearly defined sanctions in place for those who fail to meet these deadlines. Why be so strict about these rules? Because they help students understand the sorts of methods and routines which will lead to effective learning.

By the time these students reach the end of their school years I still expect their work to be neat and to be handed in on time. But if they have not internalised these ‘laws’ by this point, then it is fruitless for me to continue to enforce sanctions about incomplete homework or scruffy writing. Why? Because once they leave school and enter university they will *have* to be independent learners.

Teaching can too often be a whole lot of words: tests and rote answers, learning dry facts and saying the right things. But the goodness in education is not in how many facts we can pour into children, but leading them into the ‘second half of learning’ where they are inspired to seek knowledge and wisdom for themselves, and live out and beyond the laws that secured them. This move from protected learning to dangerous wisdom is one that is at the heart of all transformation. I believe we can see it in Paul - the model student who was a ‘pharisee of pharisees’ and knew the law better than anyone. But his life was entrapped by legalism, and it took a dramatic turn of events for him to begin to live a life ‘beyond the law’. Even after his conversion we see him struggling to shake off the ‘teacher’s pet’ mantel. Contrast his trial in Jerusalem with that of his master: while Jesus remains silent, Paul will not stop making speeches, spouting about his qualifications and special Roman

status.

If Rohr is right and one axes of our lives is that they can be seen as having two halves, then my work in education has hinted that this principle can be true for each of the 'little lives' we lead too. When we enter the life-cycle of years in school or college we might find that our time naturally falls into 'two halves': the first where we create a structure and learn the law, the second where we have internalised those laws and begin to live beyond them. All this is preparation for us to move on from this part of our life to the next, where we may enter the first half again. As the grand sweep of our lives has two halves, so perhaps the little lives that make up our life have two halves too. And it is when we begin to live within this rhythm of learning the law of where we are *very* well - college, church, job, mission - so that might break them properly, that we will begin to become healthy and wise.

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