

## Are students being equipped for the digital age?

While uncertainty about the future has always influenced education decision makers, parents, teachers and other educationalists have never had to reflect so strongly on the impact of an expanding digital age in deciding the education they want for children. *Full of character: A Christian approach to education for the digital age* by Frances Ward is both a wakeup call for educationalists and a refocusing on already known, but often ignored, educational philosophy and practice. In this month's TCF News I want to summarise this book and make some comments because it supports the Christian philosophy of education that underpins TCF of NSW - changing people, making God known, pursuing truth, a way of living, and directly challenges the direction being pursued for education in Australia and particularly NSW. This is a summary only, and may raise questions, which are more fully treated in the text.

### Setting the scene

The *Preface* focuses on a family gathering in which each participant reflects on their concerns about the world and their society as to how they might affect their children. It discusses their hopes and fears, the impact of climate change, Trump and a post-truth world and the impact of automation, robotics on the changing nature of work.

From this survey of world issues, the *Introduction* highlights the major themes where Ward wants to *provoke a deeper thoughtfulness about education*, identifying the educational philosophies on which her arguments are based. Her position is that *the progressive educational theories of the last half-century haven't focused enough on the importance of acquiring a rich hinterland of cultural knowledge*. She wants *children to practice and learn habits of the heart* to become more humane, kind and civilised. In this regard she believes *cultural literacy, a good knowledge of our own culture and the cultures around us... is crucial*. She references ED Hirsch who considers *cultural literacy as the bedrock of a good education*. (His views on what constitutes that cultural literacy are highly contested. Ed.)

Ward is influenced greatly by the focus on the left (LH) and right (RH) sides of the brain McGilchrist (2010), arguing that *LH has the ascendancy in western cultures which are obsessed with analysing, decoding, dissecting, with procedures, strategies and tactics which end up leading to ever-tightening utilitarian and instrumental spirals*. Greater balance with the RH is needed to avoid *overly managed and performance driven ideology* losing the broader and deeper purposes of RH. But both should work together and should not be conceived as involving polarisation.

The argument running throughout the book is that cultural literacy allows students to attend to RH matters beyond the instrumental and utilitarian focus that concerns LH thus contributing to human fullness of life.

A second theme of this book is to recognise and provide vision about the effects of the digital age in which we live on education today for future generations. Automation is here and robots are fast replacing jobs. In this regard, Ward turns to the contribution of character education and its focus on virtues and values. She argues people of character have the capacity to shape or manage their personalities. Character is built through habit and takes deliberate practice. Just as artificial intelligence (AI) scientists talk about hard-wiring connections and self-learning algorithms, so these methods can apply to personality. RH and LH working together.

From this introduction, including a discussion of what Christian fullness of life looks like with a different perspective on the world, Ward looks at nine virtues/values for their contribution to education. This review summarises these, highlights her digital comments and provides a brief critique.

### Chapters 1-3

In the virtue of *thankfulness*, Ward tackles the dichotomy of thankfulness and entitlement. She argues that a thankful person will naturally respond with gratitude because it begins with a sense of gift whereas with entitlement *we take what happens and the people around us, as our right, to be used, turned to our advantage*. Entitlement brings it back to “me”, LH wanting to control the environment around me. Whereas RH sees different options welcomed with a sense of thankfulness. When wrongs occur, forgiveness is more likely and not a desire for satisfaction through retaliation. Civil societies have a legal system that protects and helps to resolve serious issues. Developing habits of thankfulness start early by learning “please” and “thankyou”, by saying grace at meals and learning cultural songs and traditions often associated with celebrations.

*Self-forgetfulness* is Chapter 2 and the focus on self from the economics perspective of the 1980s that continues to the global competitiveness of today. The focus on the individual, with its promotion of self-esteem in education, all leads to a Western culture that has shifted in a Narcissus direction. *The self is a pawn that plays competitively on digital platforms for likes, feedback and friends - the approval of the tribe*. (Storr 2017). *The LH sees the individual as an atomised item, to be compartmentalised: the RH sees the whole as a sum of the parts*. The educational focus on self-esteem has played into a narcissistic culture and teaches the student entitlement. (A recent president of the USA is a classic example. Ed.) Such entitlement dissolves the glue of reciprocity and obligation that holds a society together. Religion should challenge this, but Ward sees many following the cult of individualism to ensure attendance by aligning with popular culture and the success ethic - hence the prosperity gospel.

A review of the literature about character education with its focus on virtues/values and a move away from progressive education comprises Chapter 3.

### Chapters 4 - 6

These chapters cover *carefulness, playfulness and resourcefulness*. Carefulness could be better described as nurturing, as Ward traces the influence of the mother-baby relationship on the child’s development, although there is no mention of father or parent. It recognises that the carefulness of the mother in the early years has a huge impact on how the child develops care for others outside themselves and able to engage with the world.

*Playfulness* (Chapter 5) is seen as essential to an adult who is full of character. The deeper engagement with others in play, *the greater the opportunity for RH to be part of*

*all that it meets, to encounter new adventure, to seek a newer world.* Play for many is online which can have advantages and downsides. Today, for most children, play is inside and on a screen. It is no longer the child's game but involvement in someone else's. *Some games are very addictive, requiring high levels of personal attachment and emotional investment, such that addiction is common.* How the brain operates is affected. Reality can be the game involving a withdrawal from social interaction and, with games involving an avatar, result in a confused understanding of self. There are implications for deep attention, for taking risks in the real world.

In *Resourcefulness* (Chapter 6), Ward acknowledges that trauma, especially adverse childhood experience, can have lasting adverse effects on people and includes various levels of anxiety with flashbacks, panic or depression. She focuses on resourcefulness rather than resilience arguing that resourcefulness is more than a reactive ability to cope but will bring resources to the situation to turn things around. *Resilience enables survival: resourcefulness brings more self-control.* Some of the characteristics of resourcefulness include: grit- the ability to persevere; self-control; gratitude; kindness; curiosity and energy. She riles against the over protectiveness of parents and schools and the emotional protection offered by not allowing students to be exposed to a variety of views. She advocates links to trustworthy institutions and the need for life-long learning and viewing learning as an adventure.

### **The Digital Age (Chapter 7)**

Placed in the centre of the book, this chapter is the fulcrum for others. The arguments for character education and cultural literacy hinge on them being an appropriate response to the advent of artificial intelligence and the increasing sophistication of computers.

Ward first turns her attention to automation and the changing nature of work. She rings alarms for the immediate future (but doesn't take account of the historic economic arguments for the impact of technology on jobs. Perhaps it is the speed of change that concerns her and the size, scope and sheer complexity of today's computers. Ed.). In the midst of these concerns, she raises the questions: *What is human nature?*, How can we educate computers to be humane? The discussion that follows involves hardwiring and deep reinforcement. How technology can perform minor hardware upgrades on humans by artificial teeth, knees and limbs is discussed along with the anxieties that AI brings and the question: can there be moral learning for computers? How will computers deal with moral dilemmas and how will moral codes be translated into software codes, however imperfectly.

In concluding, Ward says *Humanity needs to develop moral, emotional and embodied know-how to complement the analytical and conceptual knowledge that has become increasingly dominant, to face a future in which AI will play an increasingly important part, the strength of our human character is essential to ensure that the world grows in humane directions.* For children, an education is needed to provide know-how on the basis of a broad cultural literacy and through the development of habits of heart, mind, soul and body that would go some way to building a fully rounded person, someone who is full of character.

### **Chapters 8-13 and Conclusion**

*Thoughtfulness* (Chapter 8) continues Ward's argument about the need for character education by introducing emotional intelligence and avoiding the unnecessary and unhelpful dichotomy of heart and mind. She focuses on analysing what is heard, perceived and taken notice of to be thoughtful, with compassion and carefulness, about what

directions or outcomes might be appropriate. She writes extensively on LH dominance and what the world and education might look like without a balanced engagement with RH. She illustrates her points with the example of the contribution to both LH and RH of music and concludes that thoughtfulness *brings both LH and RH into play enabling RH is to see the coherence of the world and resist the LR drive to control and measure, to test and examine.*

Chapter 9 follows from Chapter 7 with a focus on work under the title of *Fruitfulness*. Acknowledging links between automation and productivity, Ward questions what the future might hold if there is wide scale unemployment and poverty. She sees the owners of wealth generated through AI as being taxed to support a universal basic income. In again asking what education children will need, Ward focuses on cultural, emotional and moral knowledge and teachers who can emphasise creativity, flexibility and emotional engagement. She compares modern living to religious lives in community and envisages fruitfulness as not being measured by work and productivity but by linking work to community and giving it a greater purpose in seeking and knowing God.

In *Fullness*, Chapter 10, Ward introduces arguments about human existence and how God is fullness. *To know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with the fullness of God* (Ephesians 3:19). Character needs the amazement, wonder and enchantment of knowing God and humanism just doesn't cut ice by comparison.

The acceptance and challenge of ideologies is the focus of *Truthfulness*, Chapter 11. Truth is framed by the ideology a person is committed to, even though there may be many inconsistencies that we justify or ignore. *Identifying the ideological frames we live with, and seeing them for what they are, is a step on the road of self-understanding.* They provide a sense of belonging and link us to wider social groups. Truth is knowable otherwise we can never identify lies and a desire for truth is essential to attaining it. Ideologies polarise people into "us" and "them" and the truth becomes elusive even within Christianity. Truth is something to seek rather than possess and talk of a "post-truth" society is to abandon any search for truth to give way to the dominant power. There is a critique of the work of Nietzsche and a highlighting of truth being found in the fullness of God. Seeking truth can be no more relevant than in the digital age where users face the challenge of identifying fake news and the temptation to join it. This too is an agenda that schools must tackle. Without truth, trust is eroded, and society declines.

*Hopefulness* (Chapter 12) is not about easy optimism but a deep wisdom that recognises the promise implicit in all things, situations and people. It is a perspective on life that is most often part of religious belief, especially in Christianity where the goodness of God and his sovereignty give confidence and hope. The death and resurrection of Christ are the fulfilment of God's promises and the basis of hope. It is this perspective that Christians need to bring to world issues including climate change. Hopefulness overcomes despair and recognises that the future is a promise of the fullness of life.

Finally, before concluding, Ward looks at *Fulfilment* in Chapter 13. Her immediate focus is self-sacrifice as exemplified in the life and death of Jesus and what it means for those who practice asceticism with their focus on avoiding the world, abstinence and habits of fasting, prayer and praise. She discusses growing into the fullness of God and then reflects further on what it means to be full of character. She goes back over the nine values/virtues to stress that they are *not about the endless pursuit of self but of self being defined by caring for others, in giving oneself to the good of others, in surrendering the self into the greater good.*

Her concluding remarks recognise that the book was written to inform teaching and education but is more for today's parents and parenting. She concludes by reiterating the themes of the introduction as described above.

### **Comment**

The significance of this book is the challenge to school systems that are overly focussed on LH with dwindling attention to RH. It prophesises that this focus will not equip students for the current and expanding digital age where the education they get might lack relevance and the jobs they train for might not exist by the end of schooling. When computers are programmed for moral decision-making, our world will need people full of character and not only highly prized technicians and mathematicians to write the algorithms. What are our education systems doing today to address this LH bias and provide the cultural literacy to counter the screen time of students who immerse themselves in virtual worlds where twitter becomes the main source of information?

Ward has a focus on the early years of learning and reading geared to speak to parents, but the implications for schools are obvious. Character education has a long history and the focus on virtues/values has been adopted by many education systems as per the nine values underpinning *Values in NSW Public Schools*. A strong policy document that advocates bringing these values to the surface wherever relevant in lessons. But a document unknown to most teachers and not impacting on classrooms - a policy you had to have to have a policy. The link between the policy and, curriculum and teaching practice is not obvious.

Ward does not extend her approach to talk about the key questions to facilitate it in schools, especially secondary schools. Irrespective of the focus on character education, how might curriculum and teaching practice embrace cultural literacy and a focus on both LH and RH. Questions remain about the curriculum:

- What subjects? - disciplines, inter-disciplines, multi-disciplines
- How much of each to which age groups?
- What is the content of these subjects?
- Should there be a core curriculum in secondary schools?
- What is the place of cultural studies including general religious education in the curriculum?

#### Questions about teaching and school organisation

- In what groupings do children learn best?
- What should pedagogy look like to focus on values/virtues?
- How can you best teach about controversial issues?
- What are the implications for teacher training and retraining?

Ward has set out a challenging message about the digital future and how education might engage it, but someone will need to translate these messages into the practical issues of schooling. No wonder she preferred the focus on parents rather than teachers. Her integration of a Christian philosophy of education through the focus on character and its virtues/values is to be commended as tackling the fundamental issue about having students come out of schooling full of character. But has her fundamental message about cultural literacy and LH and RH, so well demonstrated in this book, been heard by curriculum reformers and educationalists? The new NSW curriculum will give some insight to the answer to this question.

## **Selected references.**

Hirsch E. D. (1987) *Cultural Literacy: What every American needs to know*. New York N. Y. Vintage

McGilchrist I (2009) *The master and his emissary: The divided brain and the making of the western world*. New Haven, CT, and London Yale University press.

Storr, E. (2014) *Selfie: How we become so self-obsessed and what it is doing to us*. London Picador.

John Gore

## **Notice of Extraordinary General Meeting**

To be held on Thursday 21<sup>st</sup> January 2021 at 11am

at 1 Pleasant View Close, Albion Park.

Purpose of the meeting is to vote on a motion to add to the TCF Constitution, point 22A, to allow for General Meetings to be held using technology.

Proxy forms are available on request.

## **Agenda of Extraordinary General Meeting**

1. Present
2. Apologies / Proxies
3. Minutes of Annual General Meeting held 10<sup>th</sup> June 2020 to be accepted.
4. Motion: To add point 22A, with the following wording, to the TCF Constitution.  
22A. Use of technology at General Meetings.  
(1) A general meeting may be held at 2 or more venues using any technology, approved by the committee, that gives each of the members a reasonable opportunity to participate.  
(2) A member who participates in a General Meeting using that technology is taken to be present at the meeting and, if the members vote at the meeting, is taken to have voted in person.
5. General Business.

## Missionary Update

### Colin and Cathy McKay

Whilst we have permission to enter our country in SE Asia, we have not been able to. So.... Colin has started teaching at MSG (Modular Study Group) for the new school term (Sept 2020 to May 2021). MSG works on the principle of students doing 2 weeks of pre-work, 1 week of face-to-face teaching, and 1 week of post work. The pre-work and post-work are all done via the internet. However, this year, the students are together and their Science/Biology teacher joined in via Zoom. This is not an ideal situation and proved to be a difficult way of teaching Science. It is a learning process for all involved. Throw into this mix 4 different time zones, as Cook (Maths teacher) is still in the Netherlands, and two families are in the USA.

Cathy has taken on the role of Vocabulary course supervisor and has been helping Jeff, MSG Director, with some other chores. Cathy has also been helping Colin with Moodle.

### Suzanne Rowe

'Lockdown' has been the theme for 2020. The English classes I had started teaching to Chinese theological students were called off after only three weeks. Anticipated travel was impossible, obviously. My Tibetan lessons with a teacher living nearby were put on hold ... and remain on hold. Some academic pursuits were put on ice for a time though I'm back into them now.

Worst of all, from my perspective, was the isolation that my dear father endured as his health waned. My father finally left his failing body and entered God's glory early in August. Putting together a minuscule family funeral was strange but special nonetheless. I want to publicly acknowledge here the tremendous support that Dad has always provided in my work through Interserve as well as in life generally.

Unexpected delights have included weekly gatherings with colleagues around the world, regular prayer meetings for the Tibetan Buddhist world, video chats with extended family members in Australia and England, an online simple English Bible study with some Chinese mums living nearby, and, best of all, Tibetan lessons with a delightful lady living in India. Despite the sad circumstances, it was also special to spend more time than usual with family.

## Prayer Points

As we give thanks for the birth of Jesus, let us not forget why He came, and give thanks that we have a loving God willing to forgive and save.

- Pray that the holidays will be refreshing and restful for both teachers and students.
- Pray for workers in Early Childhood and the issues they face.
- Pray for fellow educators worldwide.

**Peter K:** His wife says, at 93 he is OK except for the odd fall. His men's Bible study group of 17 members is going well. Looking forward to the arrival of twin great grandchildren, a boy and a girl. Peter is also a twin with his sister.

**John K:** Asks for prayer for his son who recently had a heart attack. Also, his son only has 20% lung function due to asthma and has a fungal infection. The asthma condition can be

treated with a new medication, but they can't prescribe medication for the fungal disease. John's son is open to Christian things but doesn't have a personal faith himself.

**Suzanne V:** Seconded to State office and has been working from home since March. Pray for her, and others, who are isolated in these challenging months.

**Julie G:** Asks members to pray for Scripture in schools, particularly her local schools of Mosman Primary and High. Also pray for Christian values in schools, particularly related to issues of gender.

**Helen S:** Is doing very well, apart from physiotherapy for her shoulder.

**George:** Gives thanks for his good health. He asks prayer for his stepsons, their salvation and protection and for himself as a stepdad, for wisdom and to show the fruit of the spirit. Also pray for his part time work as a Christian Education Consultant that he might help principals and school boards in Christian schools to lead their schools in a way that gives the Lord Jesus his rightful place.

**Robyn T:** Is a primary teacher and asks for prayer for parents, students and staff to be kept safe in COVID 19 times.

**Julie C:** Is working 3 days a week from home, enjoys looking after her grandchild one day and then does chores the remainder of the time.

**Alison:** Is thankful for her caring family members, especially in times of sickness. She is working hard on tidying, sorting and de-cluttering her place.

**Elaine:** Is missing teaching SRE this term due to some health issues. She is looking forward to her holiday to Lord Howe Island after Christmas. Pray for Elaine as her husband passed away in October. She asks for prayer for the need for helpers for Kids Club so it can start again in 2021.

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