

CVE blog 2: "There's nothing spiritual in our school's assemblies now: they're just used for admin and admonishment or for 'celebrations' of mundane 'achievements'"

Tread gently

How and where you voice this concern needs some tact and wisdom. Take care that you are not heard as criticising pupil achievements or as expressing intolerance. Consider too that 'achievement' should never be underestimated. The recognition and honouring of an individual's achievement can have a huge impact on their sense of self worth, their self-image, their resilience, their moral and ethical and spiritual development. What seems mundane, routine and easy to you and me may be a huge step for an individual. In 'Art as Therapy'¹, de Botton and Armstrong argue for kindness as a key educational strategy: "All true education has this structure. The kindergarten teacher doesn't think children are contemptible because they cannot write or are confused about what number comes after fourteen. You are allowed to start, with honour, wherever you are."

So start where your school is and remember that the key markers for 'Time for Reflection' events (and these include - but are not limited to - assemblies) are the six "Sensings"²: Sensing Mystery, Sensing Values, Sensing Meaningfulness, Sensing A Changed Quality of Awareness, Sensing Otherness and Sensing Challenge. These Sensings are consciously broad. There are no agreed, defined 'experiences' and 'outcomes' for spiritual development in CfE so it is the presence of one or more of the Sensings that makes an assembly a Religious Observance or a true 'Time for Reflection'. It pays to become familiar with them and to realise that they don't need to be found only in assemblies kept solely for that purpose. Can you help your school to create achievement assemblies that *include* 'Sensing Values' ("attitudes and feelings about what is really important, what really matters") and 'Sensing Challenge', ("being challenged and moved by experiences such as love, beauty, goodness, joy, compassion, injustice, evil, suffering, death.")? Can you find ways to gently bring the spiritual into your school's assemblies, whatever their prime focus is?

Think gently

A good friend once said to me "you must think deeply to speak simply." She wasn't claiming it as an original quote and others have even gone on to make a blog and a business out of it³. I'd adapt and extend the concept slightly: "you must think deeply to speak simply **and you must think gently to speak spiritually**". Think about your reaction here: can you really see "nothing spiritual" in celebration of achievement? Or do you really mean "there's nothing *religious*" in your school's assemblies? I have found that most people react and associate negatively to 'religion' but positively to 'spirituality'. And given time and space and respect to explore together I have found that most people decide they are *spiritual*. Some may express their spirituality through their religion (and that's fine), but many more express their spirituality very differently from me. Rather than see the spiritual as only taking a religious form I am content to let it grow and to encourage it to find its own form for each individual. And rather than separate the spiritual from achievement and admin and admonishment, I prefer to look for the spiritual in them.

The Sensings are not to be confined to discrete assemblies or events - they can crop up anywhere and in any subject. They are truly cross-curricular (they can crop up in any subject area and link across all subject areas) and truly multi-curricular (they simply can't be defined or contained in a sole subject area). Some of my most profoundly spiritual moments in school for instance have been in a classroom discussion on why we need Foodbanks, in a Guidance setting exploring bereavement, during an inset day on the MVP programme⁴, in Science and Maths explorations of everything from Thermodynamics to Number Theory, and so on.

Schools need assemblies: they are a reasonably effective way to get administrative information across to every pupil and the quickest way to reach the maximum number with a message about poor behaviours or the importance of positive behaviours. That said, they are also frequently abused. They should never be just about admin or a 'baby-sitting' exercise by auxiliary staff and visitors so that teachers can have their "non-contact time". But rather than criticise the lack of anything *spiritual* offer to partner with your school to fulfil its CfE remit to ensure that every child and young person can "understand and develop [their] physical, mental **and spiritual wellbeing** and social skills"⁵ in **every** area of the Curriculum.

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¹ de Botton, Alain & Armstrong, John 2013 *Art as Therapy* Phaidon

² *The Report of the Religious Observance Review Group* 2004

³ <http://thinkdeeplyspeaksimply.com/>

⁴ Mentoring for Violence Prevention

⁵ Curriculum for Excellence: All Experience and Outcomes p.12