

Northumberland: The Big Picture

It must seem curious that I've been invited to open this conference as I don't come from these parts, and I have never taught in Northumberland schools. I do, however, have a passionate interest in how children learn, both inside and outside schools.

The reason goes back over many years. As a teenager I attended a comparatively small south country boarding school, there were less than four hundred of us between the ages of thirteen and eighteen, and most teachers taught two subjects to A level. My history teacher also taught me English, and developed in our young minds a love of poetry, and a fascination for how the past shapes the future.

Amongst the many poets he introduced us to was Hillaire Belloc and his poem about the difference regions of England. His description of the North Country fired my young imagination:

The men that lived in the North Country
I saw them for a day;
Their hearts are set upon the waste fells
Their skies are fast and grey,
From their castle walls a man may see
The mountains far away.

At the age of sixteen I set out to explore your fells and high hills. In days when the most respectable of parents saw no reason in why I should not hitchhike to places I could not otherwise afford to visit, I packed my rucksack in Portsmouth, and hitchhiked up the Great North Road. I made my way up the A68 to Carter Bar and was thrilled, and moved, by the beauty of your land. I returned many times, and extended my travels to the northwest of Scotland and the Hebrides.

The disadvantage of my small school – a disadvantage I rapidly overcame – was that there had been little choice in the subjects I could study. Quite simply in those days we could not get to university without O level Latin, and if you studied Latin you could not do geography! Yet so influential was the impact of the inspired teaching of English and history, and so determined was my teacher that we should learn to work things out for ourselves, that my visits to the North Country eventually inspired me to study geography at university.

I now realise that a few good teachers can do more in a small school than many “specialist teachers” can do in larger ones. Pupils relate firstly to the personal enthusiasms of their teachers, and only secondly to their specialist knowledge.

On the tiny island of Gometra, to the west of Mull, I came across an extraordinary story. When the Clan Chief of the MacQuarries was forced to sell his island to sheep farmers after the Battle of Culloden the Clan scattered, and his younger son, Lachlan – without a penny to his name – was forced to join the army at the age of ten. More than thirty years later Lachlan became the first Governor General of New South Wales, and effectively turned that turbulent colony of ex-convicts in Sydney into the beginnings of modern Australia. How did he do it, asked one of his friends years later? In a letter MacQuarrie wrote in his old age he said, “If you are born on a mere speck of land in the

middle of the ocean you quickly discover how things work, and why people do as they do. Learn that lesson well, and you are equipped to become a citizen of the world.”

That letter of two hundred years ago is part of the reason I'm here. Small communities are splendid places for young people to grow up within, for they most closely resemble what evolutionary psychologists now call “the ancestral environment” – that life lived by all our common ancestors out on the Savannah lands of east and central Africa which probably accounts for 98% of the several million years of human history. We each, adult and child, have inherited brains that are predisposed to learn most effectively in small, collaborative, problem-solving communities. Learn well when you are small, and later you won't be intimidated by the wider world – but plunged into that wider world when too young and children flounder.

I am not in the least surprised that, at the age of seven, Northumberland youngsters perform amongst the top 10% of their age group across the whole of Britain. It is not only small communities that help to achieve this, even more it is the closeness of the family unit. A large research programme carried out in the State of Michigan by the Kellogg Foundation in 1997 into establishing what were the biggest predictors of success at the age of eighteen found that, four times more significant than any other factor, was the quantity and quality of dialogue in the child's home before their fifth birthday. Primary school came in fifth place, and secondary school in seventh place. That is why Northumberland should be so proud of the commitment of your parents to struggle to influence educational policy. Parents – if you do your job well – are the most influential of all your child's teachers... you won't be replaced at the end of the year due to promotion elsewhere; you will still be there at midnight for a disorientated teenager; and you will have to face the challenge of “growing up” as your children grow up. That is a time-consuming task, however much you love your child. As one American writer noted recently... children spell love T.I.M.E.

Eventually I started to teach geography at Manchester Grammar School (though retaining my strong interest in both history and English). The first weeklong field trip I ever organised was to Wooler where we studied geology, land use and transport networks. Back in Manchester when I debriefed the students what had impressed them most was not Kielder Forest, or the great mass of the Cheviot, or the causeway to Linsdisfarne nor the coalmines – it was the fact that several of them had met the local chemist in Wooler who had then organised a “bun fight” on the Saturday afternoon in the church hall so that the local young people could meet up with the Manchester lads. As he said to me that evening, “These are nice kids, and many of us would like to get to know them better.”

Northumberland has the clean lungs which, appropriately developed, can help the rest of the country breathe more easily.

Years later, as headmaster of a large Comprehensive School, I brought thirty fifteen-year-olds to spend the Whitson Holiday walking the Scottish border lands from Gretna Green to Linsdisfarne, and thank goodness we did it that way round as we had the wind behind our backs!

For thirteen years I was a secondary school headmaster. I was young and enthusiastic, and no problem seemed insurmountable. I put in what became Britain's first ever fully-equipped computer classroom with a terminal for every child. That was a long time ago,

back in 1979. Eventually in my school we had more pilot projects, so my governors claimed, than there were aircraft in Royal Air Force! And they all seemed to be looping separate loops! Eventually I was forced to recognise what I had once been told by a primary school headteacher, "The trouble with you secondary teachers is that you are so interested in your subjects that you don't understand how children learn." For several years I ignored her comment, but I was wrong to do so.

As comprehensive schools got bigger in the 1970s and 1980s they became preoccupied with running ever-more courses, searching for "specialist" teachers, and assuming that examine results defined a full education. They don't, and to be fair we have known this for a very long time.

Despite the best efforts of myself and the staff, we teachers so dominated the classroom that, in a curious way, the more infatuated we became with how we taught the more dependent pupils became on us. That led many pupils to be bored, and deep-down angry at what they saw as the irrelevance of secondary education.

Things change very, very slowly. Two weeks ago in a personal letter from one of the members of the Curriculum Review Body set up last year by the Scottish Executive not too many miles north of here my colleague wrote, "I have been convinced for sometime that the dysfunctionality of the secondary school and the inappropriateness of many of its goals are major causes of youth alienation and all of the social problems which that brings. Modern western society seems to be uniquely incapable of turning the energy and enthusiasm of adolescence to constructive purpose."

Only you can decide if such a criticism fits Northumberland.

Or listen to this from Toronto, Canada last September at a conference of two hundred teachers who had invited twenty students to join them. This is a fifteen-year-old speaking: "Classes are boring 'cos we don't have to think about what we're doing. We're just told to copy stuff down off the board, or from what the teacher tells us. It makes us lazy... in fact, sorry to say this, but its you teachers who make us lazy." Does that have a ring of truth to it in Northumberland?

Over the past ten years I have been the president of an international research team called The 21st Century Learning Initiative set up originally in Washington D.C., but now working out of England. Initially we involved some sixty people, policy makers, practitioners and politicians from fourteen countries, in making a synthesis of how the research emerging from cognitive science, neurobiology and evolutionary psychology into just how it is that humans learn. It has been totally fascinating work. **The research is all around us, in the newspapers and journals, in the learned books in the bookshops and in television and radio programmes, but so far educational policy makers have been extremely slow to absorb this research. That is why you parents, with a strong intuitive understanding of children's learning, are marching to a different tune to that of the County Council. As you deliberate about the future of schooling in Northumberland it is essential that you know what this research is saying. In the few minutes that I have with you this morning I can only give you the barest outlines of all this, so I would urge all of you later on to download from The Initiative's website – www.21learn.org – some of the explanatory documents.**

But here is the outline of the story. As recently as the 1944 Education Act it was assumed that an intelligence test applied at the age of eleven could reasonably separate out the top 25% of students who would benefit from an academic grammar school education from the next 10% who needed a technical education, while assigning the majority (65%) to a “general education.” Intelligence, it was assumed more than sixty years ago, was very largely an innate quality – you had either got it or you hadn’t – and that a relatively undemanding junior school education up to the age of eleven would let the “cream float to the top.” In this model relatively little money was spent on junior school pupils, while the funding of secondary schools was significantly more generous. Within that “generosity” however more money was spent on “bright” grammar pupils than on “the plodders” in the secondary modern schools.

In the mid 20th century, and for many years thereafter, very little was known about how the brain worked, so consequentially it was assumed that all learning was the result of being taught. This was known as Behaviourism, made famous for many teachers of my generation by experiments of the Russian psychologist, Ivor Pavlov, of the conditioned responses of cats and dogs (bells, salivation, sticks and carrots!).

By the early 1960s it was recognised that such a system damaged many children, especially those whose pace of development did not follow the average – the later developers, and the frustrated gifted pupils. Selective education was replaced by comprehensive schools – at the secondary level one of these new schools was then required to do under one roof what had previously had been done under three. Secondary schools started to grow still larger.

There was a compensatory influence however.

Primary teachers became ever-more aware of the individual learning styles of their pupils, and recognised that youngsters learn more from having to problem solve and make sense for themselves, than they do from too much direct instruction. You will remember that as being the Plowden Report. Northumberland responded to this all those years ago with its tripartite system of schooling which recognised two things – that the development of children went through certain moderately well-defined stages, and that children should remain within their own communities for as long as possible. In a sparsely populated county such as Northumberland the challenge was to do this with as little dependence on school buses as possible. A tall order. Inevitably this was more expensive to provide than in a compact urban area – the kinds of areas that make up most of England.

You know the rest of the story; ever-increasing pressure on schools to deliver higher standards of those things that can be easily measured, and ever-increasing pressure to make the system more financially efficient. More emphasis, incidentally, on those things which happened in school and which can be measured, and a steadily diminishing role for the home. I guess that is part of the reason why so many of you are here now. Indeed, parents in these days are now encouraged to see themselves more as monitors of the effectiveness of the school, than the essential partners (even the senior partner) with the teachers in their child’s development.

Pause, for a moment, and consider that other European country whose standards of education as measured by O.E.C.D. are the highest in the industrial world. Just as Northumberland is the least densely populated country in England at one hundred and

fifty people to the square mile (you are outnumbered five times over by sheep!), so is Finland the least densely populated country in Europe with only some thirty-five people to the square mile. Finland, unlike Northumberland, was fought over and largely laid desolate in the second world war. How is it then that this tiny country of less than six million people is consistently at the top of the achievement scores in numeracy, literacy and so many other things? If you don't know, you'll be surprised. In Finland children don't start school until the age of seven and stay in the same school until sixteen; the schools tend to be small, less than seven hundred pupils. Only at the age of sixteen do pupils take their first public examinations. The key explanation, so the Fins say, is the way the whole community accepts the responsibility to look after and stimulate children before they go to school. "If there is a problem with young people the first question we Fins ask our self is – what has gone wrong in the community? We don't start by blaming the schools."

Why, as a friendly visitor to Northumberland, can't this happen here?

Back to the biology. In the late 1960s the mathematically based discipline of cognitive science started to explore the structure of the brain; in the 1970s and 1980s neurobiology, with the assistance of PET and CAT scans and functional MRI, was for the first time able to watch the way the brain works, and in the early 1990s evolutionary psychology (the hybrid of many other disciplines) started to work out a carefully researched chronology of how the brain has evolved over time, and why. Taken together these disciplines tell us much about human learning, and how best to support this.

Humans are born incurably inquisitive. We have to be, because we are born with a disadvantage – in comparison with other mammals whose brains are almost 100% structurally complete at birth, so developed have our brains become (and so much bigger at the same time) that humans give birth to their young when their brains are only 40% formed. Otherwise they simply would not get down the birth canal. Not until the baby is nearly three years old will its brain be structurally compatible with that of another mammal at birth.

Given that this is the case how is it that, within a mere seventy years, a human can progress from a helpless baby to a veritable Einstein, or Shakespeare? The secret seems to be in the way in which our numerous ancestors have bequeathed to us, through the genetic codes we inherited at birth, a set of metaphorical DIY guides which, if our inquisitiveness meets with some external response, stimulates each of us to pull down those DIY guides and try to understand them. The better we activate these predispositions bequeathed to us by evolution (the DIY guides) the quicker we grow the rest of our brain. However, if we are not sufficiently stimulated those predispositions eventually whither away. Culture and nurture are inevitably intricately interconnected.

Take the case of learning a language. This is something we humans do incredibly easily when we are young. Without any formal instruction most children by the age of two and a half can speak their own language, and effortlessly learn thirteen or fourteen new words a day over the next 2 years. They need no teachers, homework books, nor the threat of a test. It does not matter what the language is. A child born to Northumberland parents today and adopted immediately by a Swahli-speaking parents in Cape Town will speak perfect Swahli at the age of three without a Geordie accent. Reverse the process and you have an African speaking English without a trace of the

original Swahili. That predisposition to learn a language begins to wane at the age of six or seven, and is normally completely gone by the age of eight. All this is dictated by evolution. Language is so important as a survival skill that natural selection has favoured its early development. But the brain is always growing, and changing. If a child never speaks, nor hears language spoken by someone else, before the age of eight or nine, that predisposition will be neurologically pruned... and the probability is that that child will never, ever, be able to speak.

Language acquisition is only one of several predispositions that recent scientific research has been able to explain. We believe that there are many other predispositions that allow the young to learn very quickly simply through interaction.

The development of our emotions are ultra dependent on the interaction of the baby with its mother's emotions in the first six to nine months of life. The baby is rather like a new homeowner having to set its emotional thermostats in the way he or she decides should be the level of heating needed in each room. Fortunate is the child whose parents have their emotions well under control and bring them on gently when needed, and turn them down when no longer required. On the other hand those children whose parents are emotionally "off the wall" will condition their children to act in similar fashion. Remember, always, that 60% of brain growth in humans takes place through interaction of the environment, not within the mother.

Many of you know much about this.

An increasing proportion of what we define as "intelligence" is now being seen as a direct result of environment/upbringing, rather than genetics. That is why the Finns have such a lead over other countries; they know how to bring up their children slowly but surely. Not until they are seven do they think that they are ready for school. It is why, in England, the small community-based primary school is seen by many as being more important than a primary school which has many more resources simply because it is bigger.

Most people have assumed that, once the child has grown its brain in the early years, the brain will continue to develop in a predictable way, and is fully fashioned by the age of twelve. The "ups and downs" of adolescence have been seen as a sort of difficult hiccup caused by sex hormones.

Very recent work in neurobiology shows that the situation is far more complicated. Functional MRI scans of a group of adolescence taken at regular monthly intervals (a research programme going on at this very moment) reveals some startling changes in the structure of adolescent brains. Very simply many of the strong neural connections made in the first years of life are quite literally being forced apart by evolutionary process in adolescence which we so far do not fully understand. It seems that the exuberance, fearlessness, unpredictability and the excitement of taking risks are actually an Evolutionary Adaptation, something which over the Millennium has enabled teenagers who are more than a little "crazy" to survive better than those whose behaviour remains predictable.

That sounds stupid, even counter-intuitive. But wait a bit, and think a little harder. In the rapid development of humans from the utterly dependent baby to a seventy-year-old Einstein, different kinds of learning inevitably have to take place. In the earliest years of

life a child who is going to survive is the one who has learned well by mimicking its parents. Yet if that child were to continue doing this all its life it would simply become a clone of its parents or teachers. In evolutionary terms that would be a disaster because, in an ever-changing world, only to have the survival skills of your parents would probably assign you to the fate of the Dodo. Very simply the rebelliousness of the adolescent – however difficult this is for adults to tolerate – is probably what has driven human progress over the years. Ponder that when you next have a teenage confrontation!

If this thesis is right, and I believe that it will soon be proved to be so, then it is more than possible that this is also a time-limited predisposition. If we, as adults, try to as-it-were “outlaw” adolescent behaviour by giving them ever-more formal tasks to complete (like exams) so that adolescent phase passes them by, we may well be doing them lasting and devastating harm. The youngster who does not learn how to take risks grows up over-nervous of risk taking, probably emerging in their early twenties as the people who feel excessively comfortable criticising others, but then powerless to take any risks for themselves.

Am I describing a whole swathe of English society in this very age in which we live? Do you follow why it is that I recently gave a lecture entitled “Over-schooled but Under Educated”?

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Let me retrace my steps a bit. Four times between 1999 and 2003 I was invited to Northumberland to address various conferences. I entitled my speech “What Kind of Education for What Kind of World; do we want our children to grow up as battery hens or free-range chickens?” As an agricultural county that analogy will not be lost on you. A farmer listening too carefully to his accountant knows that if he keeps chickens in wire cages where the birds can’t waste energy fluttering their wings or stamping their feet, he will increase his yield of eggs and eventually of flesh. But if that farmer got the design of the cage wrong, and the birds have eventually to be let out, they can’t stand on their own feet, nor flap their wings. In fact, such birds become perfect morsels for a predatory fox to come and gobble up... in other words, I pleaded, give children far more space to do their own thing, and to think for themselves.

It is thinking for themselves which is a key survival skill.

Last year, 2004, I was invited to address two more conferences in Northumberland. It was a busy year for me, for I had also to visit Canada and the U.S., Japan and Australia, as well as to finish writing a book largely on adolescence that consumed much of my time. In March I was asked to conduct the first ever world-wide electronic conference organised by the International Baccalaureate Organisation, the body that sets the exams now taken by very many of the world’s largest international schools. Curiously the title they asked me to speak to was “Enriching Community; concepts of community for the future.” Now ponder that. An elite educational organisation wanting to focus on community, and not examination results, nor school buildings or their design.

In the extensive exchange of e-mails that followed an international school teacher in Tokyo contacted me. “Schools are not good copies of the world. There is a great deal that adults outside the school can teach more successfully than teachers in the school

can.” Later that same person continued, “Where schools are dependent on regulation by the state and are obliged to transmit a national ideology, the capability for meaningful and productive dialogue on many important issues is understandably limited, even when schools have the best of intentions.” That sounds very like England.

In Tokyo it was explained to me by the head of the international school in Yokohama, “that finally it seems that educationists are acting on the overwhelming body of research arising from the neuro sciences and paying increasing attention to the emotional/psychological needs of the adolescent. Many are creating middle schools where none existed before.” The following month in Vancouver I was told that British Columbia was now, as a matter of provincial policy, establishing more middle schools. In the U.S. I heard that Bill Gates has now announced where he intends to place the massive sums of money that his charitable organisation is pledged to use to help education – he is planning to allocate enormous resources to those districts that need help in breaking down their very large high schools into far smaller units... something in the order of little more than seven hundred or eight hundred children in a school.

Now think of what Northumberland is planning to do.

Soon after I was invited by the Chief Education Officer of a large English city to help he and his staff make the case that to spend the enormous sums of money they were currently being offered by the DfEE to replace all their secondary schools with brand new buildings, would be an enormous waste of money. “The last thing we need at this moment is to recreate a 19th century model of a secondary school in a 21st century ‘shopping mall’ of glass and steel. It’s not new buildings we need, it’s a new concept of secondary education that is needed. A form of learning not defined as simply being within a building.”

The next day I arrived in Northumberland to address the Governors’ Conference. It was an almost full house but the moment I arrived I realised something was wrong. Giving one hundred or more lectures a year I think I’m quite good at reading my audiences. A small group of people sat in the front row and there was then a space of several empty rows beyond which every seat was taken. It was not a good environment in which to talk. As I started to speak I was distracted by several of those in the front row very obviously reading the papers they had taken out of their brief cases, and passing each other notes. Little attention was being paid to my speech by them it seemed. I spoke of the research on adolescence, and the need to rethink the nature of schooling. The applause from the main body of the hall was considerable, but then I noted that everybody in the front row had quietly left the hall. Over lunch I was told of the politics of your authority over previous months, and that it had been the officers who had sat in the front row themselves, and left early.

I was back again four weeks later to address a regional learning conference. By then I was well attuned to the tensions that you were experiencing, and decided that I would publish a Paper on our website entitled, “When Will We Ever Learn” that drew together all my thoughts from these different conferences, and the importance of the recent research on adolescence. A month later I offered to come to Morpeth and talk this through with your two senior officers hoping to be able to be some sort of intermediary who recognised both the financial problems that faced the authority, as well as the rightful expectations of your people. It was not to be. Instead I was invited to make a response to the public document you had recently issued entitled, “Learning without

Limits.” This I did, but never received an acknowledgment. That letter you ought to see, and it will go up on our website on Monday. In the meantime two other authorities asked for permission to make multiple copies of the Paper, “When Will We Ever Learn” because, they said, it is so helpful to our thinking. Why did that not happen in Northumberland?

It's not larger schools that you need, nor is an increased range of options in itself going to help students. Certainly to spend ever-longer time on buses (time which will inevitably be taken from the child and its family's private time) is a very bad idea. Northumberland needs to strengthen the opportunities for its young people to be more productively involved in their own local communities. Above all be sceptical about building ever-larger high schools. When, years ago, most young people went from school into large factories where, for a lifetime they would be small cogs in large machines, to create large high schools might have seen a smart move. Not any longer, not when most young people will be employed in small organisations, where they'll have to work in small groups, multi-tasking, and always preparing for their next job. They need a very, very different secondary experience to their parents and their grandparents.

In Africa there is an old tribal greeting that marks the coming together of two groups of friends. It is simple. “How goes it with the children?” Could I humbly submit that the people of Northumberland need each to ask of themselves – whether they be native to the county or incomers – of what is being proposed... “How will it go with the children in the future?”

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11th October, 2004

Dear Keith,

When I met with you and Brian in late August, I understood I let you have a copy of the revised "When Will *We* Ever Learn", and to comment on your brochure, "Learning Without Limits" before October 17th. The first task – in the revision – has involved drawing in comments from many places, including Northumberland. This has been a useful exercise, and I hope you will find this final version helpful, if challenging.

"Learning Without Limits" has traveled many miles in my briefcase, and I have dived into its text many times, each time inevitably my reading of this has been coloured by recent events and thoughts, (which of course is how the brain works). This morning, having completed a thirteen-day lecture circuit in Canada, I have read it through again as I await the plane to fly back from Toronto.

It is an attractively put-together document, something that must surely have commended itself to a far larger readership than is normal for an educational document. Which is good. My concern, and this will not surprise you, is that it seems to be unduly about institutions, to the extent that the fine words at the beginning about learning being about the most natural, ?spontaneous, active?, seem to become submerged in schooling solutions... as if learning and schooling are necessarily synonymous. Which I'm sure so many of your adult audiences will readily acknowledge that they are not.

To me the most fascinating statement about Northumberland emerged on page 28 – that at the age of seven a number of children perform amongst the top ten percent of the English population. This surely is an indicator of the value of parental and community support for the youngest children at a very wide and deep level; it must also reassure you of the good work being done in your First Schools, yet it must raise questions (as you note) as to why this early benefit does not continue. The Brochure sometimes suggests that only recently has Northumberland escaped from the restrictions of being a remote, rural county (page 10), and that what is needed are better communications – both virtual and topographical. It also seems to imply that while Northumberland has a better than average level of new start-up companies, and higher survivor rates for such organizations, it is a matter of concern that most of them have less than nine employees, and nearly half of them are one-person operations (page 14). I am sure that neither you, nor the other writers of this document, would personally accept that being organizations are in themselves better than small ones, and I am left wondering if there is not a correlation between high achievement amongst your seven year olds and the security that comes of living within small, self-contained communities when it is relatively easy for the young child to grow through seeing daily expression of cause and effect in everything around them? Here I will draw your attention, and that of your colleagues, to what seems to me to be one of the most influential books of this past year about human development – the book by the English author, Sue Gerhard entitled "Why Love Matters; How affection affects the human brain." That I recommend such a book will hardly surprise you, I guess, as you have already read much of my recent thinking in the earlier draft of "When Will *We* Ever Learn."

I was confused by your statement on page 21 that there are six key values, which shape Northumberland's plans for the future. The way this is set out suggests that these are each sub

components both empowering individual learners, but then you only state what five of these are. What, I wonder, is the missing sixth?

Writing about values in a multi-cultural society is not easy, but I was looking in your brochure for a statement – a vision statement I suppose – not simply for the schools or the authority, but most certainly for a view of what sort of people you expect youngsters to grow up to be. It seems to me that without this all of us are lost. Such a vision of a person is more than individual attributes of participation, enjoyment, achievement, belonging, etc.

Is there a missing sixth component that has somehow got lost in the editorial process? Or is it that another of my difficulties with the government is that it appears to replace the attitude of enterprise with that of the entrepreneur? If so I personally would have a real difficulty with the proposals, as I do with so much educational thinking in England at the moment, that the concept of the customer has so percolated the depths of our thinking, that we have forgotten that for each and every human, life is an individual struggle – a journey – where if we don't have goals of our own we can easily perish.

Expressing this yesterday morning to a meeting of fifty bankers, community leaders and policy makers in the board room of the Royal Bank of Canada as a philosophical dilemma, created because we are not sure that we see ourselves, and therefore inevitably our children, as Pilgrims or Customs. I was overcome by the enthusiasm of their response. "There you have it", one said to me afterwards, "as business people we trivialize ourselves and our customers if we let that simplistic concept overtake our own deeper purpose of wanting all the help we can get simply to become good humans."

I must close with one further point. Addressing a two-day conference of some two hundred people from a very well organized school board district in South Toronto, a well thought conference of some very gifted teachers, I was most struck by the comment of a fifteen year old girl (10% of the audience were pupils); "classes are boring 'cause we don't have to think for ourselves about what we are doing. We are just told to copy stuff down off the board or from what the teachers tell us. It makes us lazy... in fact, sorry to say this, but it is you teachers who make us lazy."

If any of you think that a fifteen year old in Northumberland could say the same thing, then you will have to rethink some of your long term strategy around the principal of subsidiarity.

Please, Keith, do not think that I am trying to create difficulties for you and your colleagues in what I have written either here, or in the reworked "When Will We Ever Learn." The five or six conferences I have addressed in Northumberland over the past four years have given me an affection for the earnestness and commitment of many of your citizens that has kept me focused on your county...even when far away.

All good wishes,

John Abbott