Chapter 18
Semi-final Reflections: And Miles to Go Before I Sleep

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1 Education and the Common Good

I read the other chapters of this book while on holiday in Tuscany. I am delighted that so many friends and colleagues have combined to produce this book but I am even more pleased that they have chosen to write about ideas we all believe to be important. Each one of them has written about the issues with which they are concerned. While all are different, all have a common thread. While they come from different areas and their experiences are varied their central purpose is common: to help in building a more just and harmonious world. Their way of working to achieve that aim is common: through the demanding process of education. Increasingly much of what we need to learn as a base for our lives is also common. Given good will the task of providing all with a basic education on which to build their lives and their societies should be a reasonable aim. Unfortunately that seems a forlorn hope when most people and nations seek to solve their problems by force. In such a world is it futile to advocate that teaching and learning can help in making our shared society a more just and humane place? Through all the individual emphases a common determination emerges. We can work together to build a better society. In that effort education is a more lasting and more effective influence than force.

This sense of purpose was further reinforced for me during this stay. A visit I paid to Siena illustrated vividly the basic concern that all of the contributors share. I went to see the famous murals in the Palazzo Publico in which Ambrogio Lorenzetti completed his “Allegory of Good and Bad Government” in 1338 – almost 700 years ago. It depicts Good Government as being based on the qualities of Justice for all, Peace, Fortitude, Prudence, Temperance, and Magnanimity. The result of these qualities is shown in the next mural, a massive landscape depicting productive fields, farmers bringing their goods into the town to be sold, a range of traders in the town – builders, potters, weavers, and bakers together with artists, musicians, and dancers. On the opposite wall is a further massive landscape representing bad government, characterised as “a tyrant with devil-like features protecting his own interests rather than seeking the common good. He is aided by Vice and has bound up Justice.” The streets in this scene are strewn with rubbish; buildings are in disrepair; robbery, murder, and rape are evident and the fields are lying idle, overgrown with weeds and occupied by ragged soldiers.

This is a very powerful message, depicting the different effects which flow from a government which is concerned for the common good in contrast to one which promotes the interests of a special few. I could have felt more pessimistic at this evidence that people so long ago had such ideals and that they failed to achieve them. Instead I felt encouraged to be reminded that a search for justice and harmony is a continuing quest. Achievement of the “common good” is really the heart of this book, building a just and caring society where all may share the benefits. In order to achieve the common good, a priority is that all people should receive an effective education, one which enables their full and effective participation in their society.

It is in this vein that Michelle Bruniges confronts us through the words of Sophie, a senior secondary student:

Do you know what to teach me? Do you know what I need to learn? Are you confident that you can design a curriculum which will equip me to live in my world? My name is Sophie. And I am a student in one of your classrooms today.

“A curriculum which will equip me to live in my world”, surely a reasonable aim? It is for all such students, now and throughout this new century, that the writers direct their thoughts. All have been involved personally in education and in educational reform in their own countries and many have added to that experience parallel work in international organisations and in other nations. Increasingly we have come to realise that what we have in common is the largest area of life and that we can thus find many common ways of helping people to learn. That is something about which we all feel deeply. That help is needed urgently.

2 A Context which Gives a Sense of Urgency

There is little time left if we are to find solutions that will work. The tide of events is running in the wrong direction. Violence, injustice, disease, greed, pollution are among the dominant characteristics. Since the Second World War ended, world society has changed in many ways not least in the growing interdependence of nations and people. The nations’ capacity to work together is important not only for the overarching issue of peace but in many other aspects: the world economy; world health as evidenced in the current concern over bird flu and has been tragically apparent with the AIDS pandemic; and, the sustainability of our environment. Unfortunately while a look at the changes of the period emphasises the growing interdependence, it also highlights the limited ways that we have used it to the advantage of all.

There has been no global war since 1939–1945 but it has been a period of continuing violence in which more people have been killed than in that war. We are better at winning wars than at winning the peace. World population has trebled in the last 60 years but that increased population is predominantly in countries which are unable to support it. The growth is characterised by massive levels of disadvantage. In the Congo life expectancy is 32, whereas in many developed countries it is 78.