

'With all of your mind' – SCM Conference February 2012

Please note – these are 'long notes' from which I spoke, and not an exact record of the talk given... Nor have they been exhaustively checked for fluency, grammar etc – ie they are not presented as 'for publication' and thus should not be read as an article.

I'm a big fan of University Challenge.

It is, hands down, the most intellectually challenging program on TV. And I love it because it shows clearly that students aren't just dumb and lazy, but funny, bright, and intensely knowledgeable about a whole load of crap. The recent 'alumni' challenge, where they got famous people who'd been to various unis to come on, was awful. They know *nothing* in comparison!

So I love that it's a couple of fingers stuck up to the pessimistic 'dumbing down' brigade. As a teacher myself, that's important. I teach maths and people are always going on about how easy the Math GCSE is nowadays. But then I want to show them the recent question on vectors, or ask them to solve an equation... and watch them squirm.

There is an arc of learning... from local general to universal general and back to local speciality.

Local learning (ages 0 – 18) into general ocean of knowledge (university - 18 – 21) then return to local specialty.

University is traditionally the time when literally the universe is open to you. All things. all knowledge. Your whole mind open to the whole body of knowledge. There's no point throwing someone into that when they don't know the basics - so 'local general' knowledge needs to be attained before university can be entered.

And, for most people - weird perma-academics aside - university is not a place to remain. We plunge into this ocean of knowledge, but then hunt out something specific and local that we want to focus on, and work at that. That, in old language, is our 'ministry' - our 'service.'

In fact, there has traditionally always been something of the monastic about university... one 'goes up' to 'read' a degree, and then 'come down' afterwards...

University then has these twin axes: we are thrown into a deep ocean of knowledge, with so much excitement and research and innovation going on around us... but at the same time we are entering a place of 'pause' between local general learning at school, where parents have told us what to do, and local specific ministry after university, where we begin to work properly.

So uni needs some time for contemplation. Students aren't being lazy sods... they are working out what they want to do. Pausing for a while. And this is good.

There is a history of 'interruption' at this stage of life. Of radical reassessment, especially with regards where you have come from, and where you are going. The Maasai have it. The Amish have it. The ritual usually contains elements of disappearance, of a move away, and then a return. It is a journey of discovery, a rite of passage from childhood into adulthood.

Paul on the road to Damascus... he is blinded... he is thrown into darkness... but from that darkness comes a radical change. The old order is reconfigured.

The Amish have their *rumspringa*. It is popularly seen as a period of debauchery... but there is a more tragic cut here: while they are on *rumspringa* they are effectively rejected by the community, removed from their family. Only afterwards do they get the chance to choose to return.

The monk Richard Rohr puts it in terms of 'the two halves of life.' In the first half of life we are building a secure container: the schooling, the discipline, the rules and growing up... And then we hit university and all of a sudden those 'unbendable' rules become... different. 'NEVER RUN ACROSS THE ROAD!' is not a rule you can keep when you're late for a gig.

He quips it this way: 'Paul takes endless chapters of Romans to say what the Dalai Lama puts in one sentence: you must learn the law *very* well, to know how to break it properly.'

Jesus learned the law very well - we see that in some of the early gospel stories about him being found at the Temple. But he also went on to break it properly, and it is his time in the desert - what I like to think of as his 'university time' that is the transition between the orthodox teacher and the orthodox heretic.

Martin Heidegger puts it like this:

In the midst of beings as a whole an open place occurs. There is a clearing, a lighting... Only this clearing grants and guarantees to us humans a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to the being that we ourselves are.

Mark Edmundson, Professor of English at the University of Virginia rightly sees University as a stepping-stone between the life our parents have created for us, to the life we are going to create for ourselves. But in order for this to happen for a student, he notes, 'she has to face brilliant antagonists. She has to encounter thinkers who see the world in different terms than she does.'¹

Isn't this what Jesus did in the desert? Did he not pause to face a 'brilliant antagonist'?

This should be part of what your time at university is about: finding 'brilliant antagonists' and spending time with them.

When I hear the title 'with all of your mind' I hope you agree with me that the training and strengthening of that mind means shying away from the easily agreeable teachings of 'yes men' and spending time with those with whom you profoundly disagree. How else will you work out what you really think, or if your ideas are worth anything at all?

The Christian imperative is to think, and to work to change the world. Not create a new one in some far off heaven, or do nothing about this one and wait around for glory. We are here to make things better. And that may mean prayer and worship songs and all the rest... but it also means getting to grips with politics, with careful thought about how we can be as people together.

The withdrawal I am talking about is not a withdrawal to escape society, but to get some perspective on it... to train 'all of the mind' to engage with it, and know how it will tempt and persuade, and be ready for that.

You may well have the secure container from school, from your local church and your Christian Union... but now is the time to break out of that... learn how to break the law very well. And this is what you are here to do at University: to break the law, and learn how to break it well.

So for me the closest we have to a university story in the bible is the prodigal son... In fact, I want to present a darkly inverted reading of this parable as a tragedy, as a university education gone wrong.

‘There was once a man who had two sons...’ Luke begins... And we need to appreciate these opening words. The fulcrum of the story, the central point of view is not the young son, but the father. He could have begun, ‘there was a young man...’ but Luke - or Jesus, in his telling - chooses not to.

We should perhaps not read too much into this, other than to mention the adage that most history is written from the point of view of the powerful, and we might hint that the ‘light’ version of the parable, the reading where the son is lost and resurrected, is very much the father’s reading. He is overjoyed, has compassion for his son, and celebrates his return to the family empire with a large and lavish feast.

This is the traditional telling - the one that is well worn. Beautifully explored by Henri Nouwenⁱⁱ and others, yes, but well worn. A young buck goes off and, in the view of the teller, squanders the money in wild living and decides to return home, where his father welcomes him, even though his older brother is scornful and resentful.

Traditionally, this is a story of gracious restoration, a story about the journey both sons must make towards becoming the father themselves. It is a journey from youth to parenthood.

But I want to tell an inverted version.ⁱⁱⁱ It is still a story about the move from youth to parenthood, but it is a story laced with tragedy, rather than restoration, a story of failed ambitions, and an inability to escape the powerful material draw of the dominant economic culture.

‘There was once a young man...’ Here is our boy... He has a grouchy and overly-dutiful older brother, who, not being a bear of much brain, has no choice, as he sees it, but to work in the family business.

But our younger son has a bigger vision. He knows that there is a wider world outside of the safe and comfortable empire that his father has built. So he approaches him, and asks for his inheritance. And what prospective student doesn’t have to do that now? Galling, isn’t it?

But this young man had a vision. He’d always rather hated the wealth that his father

had pooled for himself, and had always dreamed of sharing it more widely. His father agrees to pay for him to travel, and the young son leaves, for the first time feeling truly free, and celebrates in a way that is oh so familiar I'm sure: some great parties. Sure, his father called it 'wild living' - but that's parents, eh? Never change.

Actually, he'd not come to a place of plenty, but had sought out a place of need. Greater need than he'd bargained for actually... he'd arrived in an area of famine.

This was hardship like he had never known. A dark place. Lonely. Tough. And I'm sure you've all been there... far from home, full of doubt.

But he wanted this to work. He wanted to make it on his own, so, resisting the urge to go back to the easy comfort under his father's wing, he hired himself out and got on with honest labour. It was degrading work, with the very animals his father had always despised, and he was constantly hungry. He'd never known hunger before, and even sat for a while in the animal feeder, considered eating the pods that the pigs had to fatten them up for some wealthy bugger who still ate well... someone like his dad.

It was too much. In an area of famine no one had anything they could share with him, and nor did he deserve it more than they. So rather than be an extra burden, he came up with a compromise. He would never live freely off his father's riches again, but he could return as a servant. This way he could rebuild his strength, and do so with honest work, and that way earn enough for his studies, and continue in his path to independence.

But as he thought, he had compassion too... and more than just going back, he could show his father the error of his father's ways, tell him about the hungry people that lay dying not so far away, and turn his father's heart to sorrow for them... They could begin to work to share what they had. It was idealistic he knew... but he was young, he had ideals. That was the point.

So our son returned home. But his father saw him coming. He'd watched every day, knowing that his son could return with dangerous ideas. He would have no choice: if he didn't play ball he would have to kill him. The son was tired, thirsty and splintered. He could only speak with half a heart. His father refused his pleas to have him work, and the robe he gave him felt comfortable, if heavy, and the ring he put on him gave him a strange but alluring sense of power. There didn't seem to be the time or place to challenge his father and persuade him to widen the radius of his generosity.

The young man sat at the laden table in front of him and thought of the places he had been... I was alive, the young man said to himself as he sat listening to his father toasting his return at the feast... but now I am dead again. His older brother seemed disappointed and angry, and his head hung low as the music raged and his father grew enraged. He'd tried to escape, and had failed; he'd let both of them down.

The two readings we have here - and there will be others - show that this is a parable in the best sense: its meaning is left open to us. The contrast of these two interpretations revolves around our understanding of the father figure.

In the 'light' reading he is good and benevolent, and in forgiving the errant son he restores him to life. The 'dark' reading, which I believe carries an increasing relevance for us, is about the psychological dangers that may lie in that path when our patrons - the systems we have grown up in, and the socio-economic structures we have inherited - are not good and perfect.

The father's selfish economics is killing his sons, and leading indirectly to the deaths of many others. Yet the father's system needs new generations to keep it going. New young people to be tempted by the personal comforts and riches...

This is the story of a hungry conservatism, which demands the vitality of its sons in order to preserve the status quo.

Rather than being a redemptive story of a lost son who returns to his senses, we can see this as a tragedy about a young idealist who left the legal strangulation of father's deadening empire, did experienced a radical new world for a while and yet, when things became tough, eventually fell back into the temptation of the trappings of wealth as he ended up hungry, lonely, in an animal feeder...

Yes, in the telling of the tale, Jesus recognised himself in that young son. He had walked away from heaven and landed, naked, poor and hungry in a manger, totally dependent on the generosity of others. He came to earth from paradise, and saw hunger, saw suffering, saw pain. He came and saw the result of his Father's religious empire: blood, dispute, power abuse, petty argument, bigotry, racism, sexism.

All of this had been to his benefit, had kept him in power, worshipped even, for centuries. But now he had seen life from the other side. What would he do? He had a decision to make, and hungry, tired and alone here was his temptation: to return to his

Father having changed nothing, and accept his Father's mantel with the old order still intact... to accept power and influence and the trappings of both, and have people adore him.

He could do that... or he could commit heresy against that old order. Yet to do that would be to challenge the old stories that his Father still lived by... and to create a new testament, a new narrative of justice and peace and radical equality by which they could live.

This is the same dilemma Luke Skywalker found himself in – dangling from some aerial in *The Empire Strikes Back*. His father, Darth Vader, urges him to join his 'Empire' – and thus together they can bring balance to the force. But Luke knows that this will lead to his death... he refuses, and by committing heresy against his father, he ends up saving him.

The son saves the father...

We see the same in the first Godfather film – but this time the tragedy is played out, because young Corleone is unable to break with family. He doesn't want to be in the Mafia, but ends up carrying on the family tradition, with all its violence and corruption.

The tragedy of the prodigal son... he went away, but came back and nothing changed. He just came back, got into the family business and got about making more money. He allowed the system to re-absorb him, and he carried on, inheriting the same establishment that had driven him crazy. And so it repeats...

This story is important because it is actually quite a radical parable about economics, about class and charity and lethargy... about having the spirit to do something, and then giving up when the good-life calls.

The Guardian recently published a Top 5 regrets of people on their death bed:^{iv}

In reverse:

5. I wish I'd let myself be happier
4. I wish I'd stayed in touch with my friends
3. I wish I'd had the courage to express my feelings
2. I wish I hadn't worked so hard (unlikely for you lot!)

1. 'I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me.'

This is the Prodigal Son all over. This is what he'll be churning when his time comes.

This is what University is for. To work out what 'true to myself' means. And that's going to be harder for you than it was for me.

Why? Because university life is being squeezed. Degrees are becoming more vocational. People are paying more, and the pressure is on for efficiency. For results. Which means cramming more in to less time. Less 'wasted' time. Less time wasted. (And there is news today of an 'automatic degree' from MIT that requires no human contact at all, and no proper community of people to study, antagonize, – or relax – with: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-17012968>)

And this is dangerous. Because with less time like this we impoverish time for reflection on what you really want to be doing.

Not only that, we impoverish the time people have for 'extra curricular' activities. With busy, efficient degrees we'd have no Radiohead, no Footlights theatre, no Monty Python or Blackadder or Facebook... All of these things were created in the time people had between lectures, between study and knowledge and education.

Wisdom won't be grown in a lecture theatre. You will be no wiser once this talk is over. You may have more information, but until you have sat and thought deeply about it and allowed it to settle, it will not become wisdom.

Moreover, it is going to be harder for you because the tentacles of capitalism are now reaching further and further into education.

Marx and Engels wrote this: "*Capital has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervour, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value...*"^v

You are not being encouraged to come to university to meditate on what ministry you might enter. You are being told that you need to work hard in order to become a good economic subject. To not squander, or waste things.

And there is a sense among academics that this is taking its toll. Many students are suffering 'depressive hedonia.'

The condition I'm referring to is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as by an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure. There is a sense that 'something is missing' - but no appreciation that this mysterious, missing enjoyment can only be accessed beyond the pleasure principle. - Mark Fisher - Capitalist Realism

The problem he outlines is that 'British students know things are bad, but more than they, they know they can't do anything about it.'

His is a pessimistic outlook, because he feels that the game is almost lost: people are more easily able to see the end of the world than the end of capitalism. They just cannot see any alternatives.

And this is where I want to leave you with a challenge.

You are the current prodigal sons and daughters. You have prodigious talents... you have vision and energy and freedom. You have left the comforts and strictures of home and school and church... but what are you going to do with your freedom?

My challenge to you is not to bottle it. My challenge to you is to use all of your mind... but also to spend time searching that mind that you have and spending time - wasting time while you have it - to decide what you will do when you 'come down' and whether you will have the guts to change the systems that gave birth to you... or if you will return to their comforts.

It is easy to be radical up the mountain... much harder when you come back down. But now is the time to seek the alternatives, and to begin living them. There are huge problems and challenges out there... not about women bishops or gay marriage... but about ecology and poverty and depression and consumption and terrible alienation.

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Many of these thoughts are taken from my latest book: 'Other – Embracing Difference in a Fractured World' which can be found here:

http://www.amazon.co.uk/Other-Embracing-Difference-Fractured-World/dp/144470110X/ref=sr_1_4?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1329147526&sr=1-4

Brief notes...

ⁱ See his excellent article 'Dwelling in Possibilities' here: <http://chronicle.com/article/Dwelling-in-Possibilities/7083>

ⁱⁱ See *The Return of the Prodigal Son* by Henri Nouwen. http://www.amazon.co.uk/Return-Prodigal-Son-Story-Homecoming/dp/023252078X/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1329147009&sr=8-1

ⁱⁱⁱ I have been unable to find any other reference to this parable being read in this way, and believe it to be original. I will be expanding on it much more in a forthcoming book piracy, provisionally titled 'Mutiny: Why We Love Pirates, and How They Can Save Us.' See <http://www.kesterbrewin.com/2011/08/05/the-pirates-gospel/>

^{iv} <http://www.guardian.co.uk/lifeandstyle/2012/feb/01/top-five-regrets-of-the-dying?INTCMP=SRCH>

^v Quoted in *Capitalist Realism* by Mark Fisher. http://www.amazon.co.uk/Capitalist-Realism-There-Alternative-Books/dp/1846943175/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1329147406&sr=1-1