



Diana Livesey (Rose, PPE 1958) Prize

Passing on the Torch

When I was twelve years old I was given the honour of carrying the torch in the opening ceremony of the Steiner School's Olympic Games. My experience of it? Well once I had exhausted my initial excitement I realised that torches of the wood and flame variety are much heavier than their battery powered counterpart, the flame roaring from the paraffin drenched rag on the end of the stick singed my hair and almost instantly warm beads of sweat quickly joined those cold nervous ones on the back of my neck that the large crowd had caused moments earlier. The constant battle against the wind to keep the torch alight was one I almost wanted to lose so that I could put down the torch and stop the lactic acid in my shoulder building up. This moment was not a particularly formative or profound one in my life, and it only reared from the depths of my memory when I started thinking about the passing of torches. But what I clearly did learn from the experience is that torches aren't all that good. Of course in the context of ceremonies they serve well for dramatic effect but as a method of lighting their deficiencies should be clear. So the question which should be levelled at those people who see it as their life's duty to 'pass on the torch' they inherited is why give someone a flaming torch when you could inspire them to invent a light bulb?

Those people who see it as their duty to preserve and protect that which they have inherited from previous generations are often described as conservatives. You can find the conservative attitude in all aspects of life. The accountant who lives down the road with a beautifully clean Ford Mondeo and 1.8 children and who still takes as gospel the advice of his parents lives and breathes conservatism. The politician who extols things like the institution of marriage and 'good' Christian values on the basis that they have served generations before us so well also exhibit this conservative desire to preserve and maintain. It seems the underlying motive for such a desire lies in people who have a character which compels them to be obedient to authority and to accept the familiar due to the fear of the unknown. In the words of Michael Joseph Oakeshott, to be content with 'present laughter' instead of seeking 'utopian bliss'. If thousands of years of human experience have resulted in the world we live in then what gives just one person who lives for perhaps only sixty years the right to defy the combine experience of those who came before him? The conservative says there is very little, and believes their life is well spent if they manage to preserve the world that has been created for them. These types of people will likely pass on the torch and are content with doing so.

I was lucky enough to be born into a family of aged ex-hippies. Like many kids, at age four, my favourite word was 'why'. Unlike many people it has remained so throughout my life so far. It seems as though a combination of heavy handed parenting and impatient teachers often saps this youthful questioning from children. The reason seems to be to stop them being so annoying. Certainly I have annoyed people by not relenting in asking 'why?'. Religious Education classes at



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the Catholic school I attended provided, in my view, perfect opportunities to exercise my questioning faculties. The reluctance of the teacher to accept this and the ensuing copy of Richard Dawkins' "God Delusion" that magically appeared on his desk certainly ruffled a few feathers. But it is my opinion that ruffling a few feathers is a small price to pay if it results in people questioning some of their most deeply held beliefs so that they can either reaffirm their truth or progress to new and better ones. This attitude, to doggedly question the world around us, seems to be one of the defining characteristics which is present in people who have helped change the world for the better in their lifetimes; people who have realised the torch is not that good and bestowed a light bulb to future generations. This is clearly evident with great scientists. Galileo believed so strongly in questioning orthodoxy that when he discovered that the earth is round he published "Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems", which he was later prosecuted for by the Inquisition in Rome. But a questioning attitude is not constrained to great scientists. When returning from South Africa to his native India Gandhi did not simply accept his station in the Indian caste based society. He went about trying to make Britain grant India independence; he knew the society he was born into was unjust and had the courage to try to change it so that future generations could have something better. So what lessons can be learnt from these rather clichéd examples?

I believe there are two:

- 1) If you want to change the world you live in for the better you have to question the world you were born into
- 2) Once you have found something which you believe could be done better you often need the courage to stand up to those who resist change.

The founding of our College, by Dorothea Beale, is a perfect example of putting these lessons into action. Miss Beale, very discontented with the lack of access to higher education for women, began working hard to establish a place of learning in 1893 for women. From this act started the trial which led to St Hilda's being official acknowledge by the University in 1910 and by 1920 woman were permitted to receive degrees on par with their male counterparts. This radical and important change for women that has seen access to higher education become equal shows what can be done if the world is viewed very much as a work in progress.

It seems that conservatives neglect these lessons or dismiss them as unimportant. But in doing so they misunderstand the dynamic of creation and progression which necessarily involves some change from the past. In being so preoccupied to preserve the torch for future generations the conservative attitude leads people to miss opportunities to improve on the torch. Although I have no proof of this, and Professor Google will provide no support, I guess that the man or woman who first discovered that dousing a rag in a flammable liquid and attaching it to a stick was



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indeed someone who was simply unimpressed by how restrictive the conventional log fire is, especially when on the move. The inventor almost certainly had a questioning attitude and was not content with the proverb of the time 'passing on the log fire'. In essence it seems strange that conservatives have so much reverence for many of the institutions of the status quo and those people that created them and yet fail to see that many of the good aspects of our society are the product of those venerated people rejecting what had been bequeathed to them by earlier generations.

Steve Jobs, one of the great innovators of recent years, said to a graduating Stanford class 'stay young, stay foolish'. Having an infantile attitude as an adult is socially awkward in some situations but with regard to your world view having the questioning attitude of youth is extremely valuable in finding new ways to live, and being foolish enough to disagree with all those who have come before you is the only way you'll produce a positive change. I think that a lot of people in the process of 'growing up' lose this very important attitude. The submission to authority be that to parents, teachers, or bosses often blinds people from seeing better ways of living. Despite Oxford's quirky obsession with tradition, which often means doing some rather peculiar things like wearing black suits and black gowns to exams in the height of summer, it remains one of the best places in the world to cultivate and sometime re-discover a questioning attitude to the world. While we are given heroically long reading lists every week to find out what clever people before us wrote on a subject, an essay is normally incomplete without thoroughly questioning their views. So while in 20 years' time I may not be able to give you a summary of Bernard Williams's critique of Utilitarianism, I hope that I will maintain the ability and inclination to robustly evaluate my surroundings. If there is one torch which I would like to pass on to people, burning more brightly than ever, it would be the fire in the belly of those with the drive, enthusiasm and imagination to at least attempt to pass on something better than they inherited. In this case I believe the best way of doing so is allowing people to learn from your example.

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