

For This Life

Dave Francis explores the point of mission statements with some scepticism and tentatively suggests one possibility.

In September last year, one of our SOF regional groups came up with a ‘Statement of Purpose’ for the Network. It was a worthy attempt, building as it did on some discussions begun by the trustees on what the Network has been for, what it is for now, and what it may be for in the future. I must admit to some scepticism about such statements and strap-lines. Outside every business these days, it seems, there is some sort of catch-phrase under their name: ‘Quality through experience’, ‘Unlocking potential’, ‘Every little helps’, ‘Because you’re worth it’...

One of the schools near where I live now has gone down the academy route and is trying to impress prospective parents with a Latin motto attached to its school crest: *‘curamus et stimulamus’*, which sounds a bit like they’ve just got a new sponsorship deal with a manufacturer of birth control products. I’m assured it means ‘caring and challenging’ however. But that is better than the attempt at another school (where I used to teach) to induce improvements in attitude and behaviour. The Headteacher wanted all members of staff to use two catch phrases with the children at every appropriate moment. The phrases were ‘Simply the best’ and ‘Manners’. He’d obviously been on a training course the week before.

Help me – my beast stirs!

One of the more ambitious members of staff thought this was actually quite a good idea. To support the Head against the cynics he got some A3 sheets from the photocopier and made big letters spelling out the slogans. These were then put up in the window of the library so that everyone could see them as they approached the school. This was fine up till about lunchtime, by which time someone had rearranged the letters so they now spelled ‘HELP ME’ – ‘MY BEAST STIRS’. These new mottos were soon removed

by the Deputy Head and no more was ever heard, either of ‘manners’ or of ‘simply the best.’

What is going to inspire people today to be interested in what the SOF Network has to offer? No slogans, mottos or mission statements are going to have any long-term impact. All the same, if SOF is to survive and prosper, there ought to be some way of encapsulating its *raison d’être*, even if that may shift and change over time. So, I’ll start with some suggestions and we’ll see what you make of it. For me, one of the attractions of the SOF is that it has something to say about how we might live as more reflective individuals, filled with wisdom not hate, whose actions in the world are informed by the insights of the world’s great religious and philosophical traditions, without the *need* for metaphysical beliefs (though some may have them) and without treating those traditions as though they have immutable boundaries between them.

In thinking about this I want to refer to some ideas expressed by the philosopher, Ted Honderich, who happens to live in my town of Frome (say ‘Froom’) in Somerset. Honderich writes about what he calls the ‘Principle of Humanity’. Essentially this is about ‘getting and keeping people out of bad lives.’ And ‘bad lives’ are defined via ‘great human goods or desires: decent length of life, bodily well-being, freedom and power, respect and self-respect, relationships, goods of culture.’

<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/~uctytho/PofH.html>

Note that *bodily* well-being is not the only sort of well-being. There are mental, emotional, some would say ‘spiritual’ matters to take into account also; and it’s worth considering what the signs of a person ‘living well’ might be. Is a person, for example, who seeks out and learns from the wisdom and compassion of others, who lives quite happily in the ‘now’, accepting uncertainty, and who knows what is of real value

in the world, the sort of person who might be a model for 'living well'?

While each of these features needs some unpacking in turn, there is also the question of how any of us are going to 'be well', if the planet on which we live is sick? A recent SOF conference speaker, Jonathan Porritt, makes use of Fritz Schumacher's *Guide for the Perplexed* to indicate how we might go about 'saving the Earth and humankind':

'Religious and spiritual leaders have talked about the process of re-sacralising the Earth; bringing the sacred back into our understanding of what we owe the living planet and all life forms with which we share it – moving from that dried-up phrase 'respect for nature' to something much more akin to 'reverence for nature'. Unless we begin to see that happening in many parts of the world, personally, I don't think conventional environmentalism has a hope in hell of dragging people back from the abyss that now confronts us.

Schumacher also said that the only opportunity to move people away from the kind of rampant consumerist materialism that now dominates our lives is by celebrating the power of enoughness – not an elegant English word – there are many other words that capture the idea: frugality, voluntary simplicity, modesty. I am watching politicians struggle with the power of rampant consumerism in the world today; they honestly are completely baffled as to how to bring people back from a sense in their own lives that their future depends entirely on access to yet more consumption, increased purchasing power and all of those things that go with it. Will politicians ever come up with a sufficiently convincing antidote to the seductive appeal of consumerism?' (*Sofia* 85, September 2007.)

Some themes are emerging, many of which feature in the discussions of members in SOF regional meetings:

- Keeping people out of 'bad lives';
- Great human goods or desires;
- Building mental / emotional / 'spiritual' health;
- Learning from the wisdom and compassion of others;
- Living with existential uncertainty;

- Knowing what is of real value in the world;
- Reverence for nature;
- Celebrating the power of enoughness.

So where does this leave us in relation to the goals and purposes of the SOF Network? Our very existence, as Lloyd Gearing says, 'is one small sign, among many others, that we are coming to an end, not only of conventional Christianity, but of a whole cultural era, some two thousand years or more in length, in which Buddhism, Christianity and Islam have been the three most widespread cultural traditions' ('Saving the Planet' in *Time and Tide: Sea of Faith beyond the Millennium*, 2001. O Books: Arlesford, p.84).

Mythos and Logos

If this is so, where might SOF be of most use and value today? To answer this, we need to work out what might be at the root of people's 'bad lives' in this day and age. Karen Armstrong, in her book, *The Battle for God* (2001, Harper & Collins) suggests that one of the major causes of problems in the world today lies in the failure to distinguish between *mythos* and *logos*. People, she said, have never been taught how. Armstrong argues that the *mythos* was:

'Something which looked back to the origins of life and culture and to the deepest levels of the human mind. The stories were never meant to be taken literally, since they were about meaning not practical matters (p. xiii).

Logos, which was also important in the pre-modern world, was the 'rational, pragmatic, and scientific thought' that enabled people to function well in the world (p. xiv). *Logos* is practical and looks ahead. It elaborates old insights, is investigative and aims to control such things as our environment. The pre-modern world did not always manage to keep *mythos* and *logos* in balance, but society was at its best, and people were at their psychologically healthiest, she argues, when it did. But since the eighteenth century, the astonishing successes of science and technology have led us to believe that only scientific rationalism, the *logos*, is true.

Richard Dawkins largely promotes this view. Dawkins believes that what children learn from



Plato expelled the poets from his Republic.
Detail from *The School of Athens*. by Raphael.
Fresco in the Vatican. wikipedia.org

religion is, at its worst, evil. They will learn 'certainties'; they will learn that 'their religion' is true, absolutely, and that others are false or at least misguided. They will learn to fear or even hate the other.

But religious fundamentalists too have often fallen into this trap, attempting to save their faith from the forces which threaten their most sacred values by making claims about the literal truth of, for example, the Genesis 1 creation story. They do this either by insisting that their dogmas are scientifically true, or by 'transforming their complex mythology into a streamlined ideology' (Armstrong p. 366). Or both.

The point is that fear is at the root of distorted attempts to rescue the *mythos* from the current perceived supremacy of the *logos*. But now we see that many people are using the media to entertain, inveigle and insult rather than to communicate facts, ideas and insights, and this of course includes many of those using Twitter, Face-

book and other internet discussion fora.

So how does this relate to our task: the construction of a 'mission statement' that will inspire us all – at least for a short while? How can we all 'Be Well' in the contexts we find ourselves? These are life and death questions – really; as those of you know who have been involved, to take one extreme, in dealing with the aftermath of a person's suicide. The point and the attraction of SOF for many, myself included, is that it values highly and does not dismiss the religious traditions of the world. Rather, its members seek out for themselves the wisdom contained therein, once the metaphysical and superficial has been contextualised. But this all contains a number of huge challenges, challenges that may involve considerable self-sacrifice.

For myself, inspiration struck on the train from Bristol Temple Meads to Birmingham New Street. My 'statement of purpose' is simple, but, I reckon, deep. As I wondered what SOF was *for*, a verse from the New Testament came strangely to mind. St Paul said, 'If only for this life we have hope in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.' (I Cor. 15:19). Three words emerged for me in my meditation: **for this life**. For Paul, it was essential that there be another life than this one, for that was the belief on which his life rested, and without which all his trials and tribulations were, he thought, without worth. Personally, I had long given up on 'hope



Poet Anne Beresford

in Christ', certainly for any other life than this. Though perhaps there was some truth here. For if there is no life but this one and people sacrifice their lives in the hope of another, then they may indeed be amongst those most to be pitied. (Have you seen Martin Scorsese's recent film, *Silence*?)

So for those of us who neither hope in Christ, nor for any other life than this one, is there any reason to act in a self-sacrificial, generous and loving way? Perhaps only in *deciding* that we are 'for... this.. life':

- **'FOR'** this life, because we *affirm* and do not deny the value of this life, promoting that which helps people to keep out of a 'bad' life.
- For **'THIS'** life, because we concern ourselves with the matters of the life we experience in the here and now, not with any life supposed to be 'beyond' this one. Thus, the old distinctions between inner and outer life, or between secular and sacred spheres, or temporal and eternal concerns, *disappear*.
- For this **'LIFE'**, because, as people say, 'Life is what you make it'. In saying 'Yes' to life we *face up* to the whole package of 'it all'. With Don Cupitt we say, life is 'finite, temporal and contingent... It is outsideless... Life is, simply, everything' (*Life, Life*, 2003, p.7).

In all, SOF Network members seek to learn from all the religious and non-religious traditions of the world, and to try to create better, more generous selves; better, more peaceful relationships; and a better, more loving, world. To this end, 'we must live life to the full, while we can!'

I'm sure the Network does not *need* a motto, strap-line or mission statement, but it is an interesting endeavour to reflect from time to time on what we are about. Perhaps we are best thinking up our own statement of purpose – and offering them for publication in *Sofia*, *Portholes* and the like. That way we can share our ideas and inspirations amongst our members and beyond: for all of our lives.

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Kimonos in the Hospice Shop Window

oh let's donate the reckless blue kimono to the hospice, let someone on their last legs stand, sit or lie in it. Whatever gender, let's not be binary at this late date. Let's wrap it loosely round them, silk like water lapping at their nipples like lips. Let them imagine babies, lovers, schools of fish. Let them loll in the blue lagoon of this kimono whose embroidered cranes might take their tired thoughts skywards, let's give them the choice to float or fly. Or both at once, like blueness, sacred and profane. Let's donate the pink one too, pale blush-silk to pull round a frame gone lean and lush in its own way, late on, young, old, let's not fuss overmuch about the numbers now. Settle the pink kimono on a bed and watch the glances it gets, still welcome. Then there's the short orange one, let's toss that into the mix and see who goes for its blaze of glory to the waist, no mimsy bed jacket, a silk racket crackling away, a fire going, going, let's leave it at that.

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