

Vision

Published by the School of Philosophy (Auck.) Inc. for enjoyment and communication

Issue 27, June 2012

Venice - A Lesson in Good Government

by Simon Laurent

**Based on a presentation for the School of Philosophy Cultural Day,
March 2012**

I spent an extraordinary week in Venice with my family during the Northern winter. Its effect on me was profound and unexpected. I could not explain why, standing on the Rialto Bridge on a chilly, overcast morning, tears arose unbidden in response to an inexplicable beauty before me.

My quick love of the place was tempered by sadness. From time to time I caught a glimpse of the city-state's past brilliance, when its canals swarmed with trade ships and elegant patricians celebrated festivals in its squares, some flirting from behind flamboyant masks. Nowadays Venice hangs in a time warp of deliberate, melancholy decay, and any careless tourist can buy a mask from one of dozens of kiosks without ever thinking of putting it on.

While I was there I heard a couple of anecdotal snippets about the city's past which got me thinking about why this tiny cluster of artificial islands was so remarkably successful. For successful it certainly was.

Bits of History

"*La Serenissima*" – "the most serene Republic" was not a name given to Venice because of the lack of cars on its narrow alleyways. Rather, it earned that title because of its remarkable stability over some 1100 years of existence as a sovereign state. And with stability came prosperity.

Venice's rulers understood and applied, with great dexterity, what modern strategic theory now terms "hard power" and "soft power". Hard power includes force of arms and access to resources and position which enable coercion of others. During the Mediaeval period Venice arguably fielded the greatest maritime navy in the Mediterranean. Its powerhouse was the Arsenale, a shipyard which could build and caparison a 250-ton galley in a single day. Some 16,000 specialists operated a canal-based production line more than 500 years before Henry Ford "invented" the idea for the benefit of modern industry.



One door of La Salute Basilica

Its sea power was greater than that of the legendary Carthaginian fleet which held off the Roman Republic for more than a hundred years.

Venice's navy at its height consisted of some 3300 vessels, most of them merchant ships which could be adapted to fight at short notice. It largely engaged and paid foreign mercenaries to sail them. By the time of the Renaissance it mastered colonies extending to Cyprus and the shores of the Ottoman Turkish Empire. Its vessels formed the backbone of the Christian alliance which bested the Turks in the landmark Battle of Lepanto.

My symbol for Venice's power is the basilica of Santa Maria della Salute. This massive four-sided "plague church" was built in the mid-1600s in thanksgiving for deliverance from

the latest, most destructive bout of disease to hit the city. Significantly, it dominates the approaches to the head of the Grand Canal and says quite clearly to any foreign guest "We built it because... we can." I believe that it was no coincidence that it was constructed right next to the old custom house.

On the other hand, "soft power" resources allow one to persuade or to set the rules of the game. One of Venice's key tools was the gold ducat first minted in 1284 which maintained a stable weight and purity until the end of the Republic 500 years later. Having the most reliable medium of exchange in Europe merely added to Venice's existing influence as the clearing-house for trade between Western Europe, Byzantium and the Islamic world. Its fierce independence from Vatican interference

earned it excommunication at one stage, but also meant that it was free to deal with the East where other Christian nations tended to be more circumspect. At the same time, when called upon to assist Constantinople against the Seljuk Turks in 1082, Venice traded its maritime strength for exemption from customs duties for all its traders in the Byzantine ports, thus gaining an enormous advantage over native merchants.

The Venetian administration understood, for a maritime centre, the importance of strong commercial regulation. It is no accident that Antonio, the archetypal merchant of Venice, says:

The Duke cannot deny the course of law;
For the commodity that strangers have with

us in Venice,
If it be denied, will much impeach the
justice of his state;
Since that the trade and profit of the city
Consisteth of all nations.

Thus, Venice became the place to do business. The city and its burghers thrived spectacularly well upon it – so much so that a jealous Europe formed the League of Cambrai in 1508 to rein in Venice’s arrogance by force. The venture failed and Venice emerged stronger

great wealth, intellectual achievements and inspiring art. One must look a little deeper.

A fascinating feature of the nation’s make-up was its system of government. Some have described it as the perfect embodiment of Aristotle’s three types of rulership

- Democracy in the form of the Great Council or Consilium Sapientis (“council of the wise”) which came to number some 3000 elected citizens;



From the Rialto Bridge

than ever. The city was never overrun until Napoleon marched into the city in 1797.

Checks and Balances

Mere financial, military or political success does not explain why Venice’s good fortune lasted so long. After all, a city like Florence came to wield considerable power over its neighbourhood for a time, and produced

- Oligarchy, by way of a bewildering number of decisionmaking bodies – the Senate of about 200 elders, the Council of 40, the Council of 25, and the (in)famous Council of Ten which operated secretly and ruthlessly behind closed doors; and
- The Doge bearing, as Gasparo Contarini said, “a show of royalty”.

Over the centuries Venice developed processes to minimise the potential for corruption. Thus, the members of the Council of Ten were elected by the Senate for one-year terms; but each person took office at staggered times in the year so that not only were experienced officials always in place, but there was less scope for members to form “comfortable” alliances while in office.

The election of a new Doge was a remarkably convoluted affair involving no less than 11 stages of ballot and elimination of electors. The Doge himself, although he was the supreme ruler, could not even open his own mail unattended; and had to make decisions in the presence and with the approval of his councillors. The Doge’s station was set about by a rigorous set of regulations, even down to the requirement to wear the ermine cloak not less than 10 times a year at public events. Nor was the Doge allowed to leave the Ducal Palace except on official engagements such as religious festivals. Those few Doges who tried to exert real power paid for it with their lives – but such incidents appear to have been rare.

A Florentine observer, Bernardo Rucellai, said admiringly:

It seems to me that – for an unarmed city – the Venetian government is as fine perhaps as that which any free republic has ever had... For it is no more than a government in which participates the entire body of those who are eligible to hold office; nor is there a distinction made on account of either wealth



La Serenissima

or lineage, as is made when the aristocracy govern, but all are admitted to everything on equal terms, and they are many in number, perhaps more than with us.

Yet, once again, this was hardly a unique phenomenon. Many Southern European cities and city-states, from late Mediaeval times onward, operated democratic parliaments and instituted (with limited success) the semi-mayoral system of the podesta as chief administrator.

A Conclusion of Sorts

As I thought further on this I struggled to draw a neat conclusion about Venice’s longevity. Perhaps, in the end, it was simply a happy accident of geography, political cunning, a strong navy and civic regulation honed and refined over the centuries. There are, for instance, parallels between the situation of Venice and that of imperial England. Both were island nations; both relied upon control of the seaways and trade routes; and both operated a three level government of monarchy, oligarchy and commons.

There was, however, a story which may be illuminating. When a senior member of the

government called into question a sentence handed down by the Council of Ten in its role of supreme court (sharing characteristics of the secretive English Star Chamber or the Spanish Inquisition), this led to a fierce debate in the Grand Council between those who supported the status quo and those who sought to rein in the Council of Ten's autonomy. Contrary to expectation, the crowd in St Mark's Square resoundingly opposed any meddling with the workings of the secret tribunal, and threatened to demolish the palaces of those who supported change. They loved their government in all its arcane complexity, and they loved it because it worked.

The Venetian system thus represented the reverse of what Walter Bagehot famously said of the English Monarchy – that it was strong because it was easy for the common man to understand. In a sense, the Venetian system had the unwavering support of its citizens for centuries because they didn't understand it.

This gives pause for thought. As an administrative lawyer I champion, on an everyday basis, transparency and accountability in

the use of power. These are no doubt great virtues in our constitution. But for all the efforts toward inclusiveness, consultation and consensus our modern society is afflicted by cynicism about its decisionmakers. The love and reverence for institutions has been beaten down by a fixation with accountability. It may be heresy to call it a disease of our time, but it has eroded the status of religions and made the work of schoolteachers more and more difficult. Although “doctor knows best” may not necessarily be a wise stance if it is adopted thoughtlessly, “doctor knows nothing and cannot be trusted” is arguably more dangerous still.

So the reader is left with two questions to ponder:

1. Is it more important for people to be confident about the integrity of their leaders, or to love and trust the system in which they work?
2. If it is to love, then how to achieve that love?

As always, the questions are no doubt more important than the answers.

Auckland School Cultural Groups

Come – and enrich your life!

| | | | | |
|----------------------------|-------|-----------------------|------------------|----------|
| Economics | @ 27 | Sat. 7.15 – 9.45 am | Russell Allen | 276 8770 |
| Forms of Government | @ 27 | Sat. 10.00 – 11.45 am | Russell Allen | 276 8770 |
| Plato | @ 268 | Wed. 9.45 – 12.00 pm | Lillian Beanland | 521 5054 |
| Portrait Drawing | @ 27 | Tue. 12.30– 3.30 pm | Paul Brickland | 445 9012 |

New members are welcome.

For enquiries, please phone the group tutors listed.

At 27 Esplanade Rd, Mt Eden & 268 West Tamaki Road, West Tamaki.

Ficino School

'Human society is built on stories – her-story, *history!* As soon as people get together they start exchanging stories.' Joy Cowley

All who attended the opening of the Ficino School's new library wing on Friday, May 25th, had the pleasure of meeting and listening to Joy Cowley, one of New Zealand's leading children's story writers. The choice couldn't have been better. Within seconds she had the attention of adults and children alike and we were all keen to follow her on her journey, wherever it was going to go.

She began by mentioning that she'd learned about Ficino School through its DVD and went on to say that if she *'could make a school, it would be a school like this'*. Her talk was based around child reading and story writing and her views on how to encourage the love of reading in children, and the traps which can and do impede that love if not delivered properly by educators and parents.



'Story telling is natural to children. They find meaning in the stories they hear and make meaning with the stories they tell. All stories have an autobiographical element and that includes the "fantasy" stories that young people make up. They should know the difference between fantasy and

reality – but they shouldn't be made to stop imagining.'

She went on to say that children often invent stories to save themselves from getting into trouble, like a boy she spoke of, whose mother had said, that if he lost the new shoes she'd recently bought him, he wouldn't go and see Father Christmas. Many parents reading this article will already



Joy Cowley speaking to parents & children

What makes a good story?

1. It has meaning for a child and is child-centred. A good story is empowering of children. It affirms them and helps them with problem solving without being preachy.
2. It is exciting and has a well-defined plot.
3. Children enjoy dialogue in a story. If there's too much narrative, they say there isn't enough talking in it.
4. Some children, usually boys, enjoy factual stories – tales of hero's, accounts of shipwrecks, volcanic eruptions, extraordinary feats etc. Remember that not all children relate to make-believe.

Library Opening



Tegan Brickland Head Girl, & Bevan Tucker Head Boy cutting the ribbon with Joy Cowley at Library Opening

recognise the reason why a child might make up a wild story like... 'a monster stole them but got caught by a Policeman and had to give the shoes to the policeman,' when he came home from kindergarten without his shoes!

By having a monster in the story, there was no way he could get the shoes back and by having the policeman... there was absolutely no way the shoes could be claimed. In Joy Cowley's words, he had told a story big enough to match the threat given by his mother. It was essentially about how he felt! Many of us see this sort of storytelling as a lie, but there is often something more behind it, a protection, as in this example, or it may be a fear and so on. Her advice was to encourage the creativity of the story by saying something like: 'Now that's a wonderful story. Lets write it down – and then you can tell me what really happened.' As it turned out, the shoes were found in the sand box and all ended well.



New Library

She moved on to say that, 'reading isn't natural to children because it is a discipline to be learned and for many that process is difficult. Children need to find meaning in reading. They need entertaining, child-centred stories which help them to learn to read and enjoy reading. Pleasurable learning leads to pleasurable recall. The opposite is also true.'

A list of answers from 8 and 9 year olds, in response to a question about the difference between watching television and reading a book, some are listed below:

1. You can read a book anywhere.
2. You don't need electricity or batteries for a book.
3. If you stop reading in the middle of a story, a book waits for you.
4. A book is quiet.
5. A book is private.
6. A book is easy to carry.
7. With a book you make your own pictures in your head.
8. A book needs you to get a story out of it. A TV goes on whether you're there or not.

How can parents hone their skills to make reading interesting?

By putting on voices or letting the children say a refrain which is repeated throughout the story. Making it fun in any way you can. Be spontaneous! Personal stories are always interesting or stories which have been handed down from generation to generation.

Joy mentioned a personal favourite about her grandfather who, 'gave up his horse and cart to buy his first motor car. When he reached the town, he forgot about engine and brakes and started yelling at the car, "Whoa boy! "Whoa boy!" as he drove up the footpath and into a shop window.'

Do kids like reading about themselves?

'Kids LOVE reading about themselves, but are not always good at writing about themselves or talking in detail about something they have done. They need encouragement.

Remember life is in the detail.'

Using questions to draw more information is a very effective tool as it helps the memory of the teller.

Children answer the questions you ask, they don't tend to embellish with detail, so you need to find the right question to bring forward the details that make an experience interesting.



Peter Crompton & Peter Ashton architect for Library Project

Some Questions from the children:

Q: 'Did anything inspire you to write?'

A: 'My teachers. We didn't have any books at home, only the Bible. I read a lot of the Classics, and even though I didn't really



understand everything, they were exciting enough to keep reading. I read a book once by Victor Hugo and although the name of the main character was clearly written on the cover, I read the book twice to find his name in the pages. Nowhere was he mentioned. It was years later that I learned that *Les Miserable's* was not a person's name!

Q: 'How did you learn to write books?'

A: 'Through trial and error. I could write, but I couldn't edit. Editing helps the finishing.

Q: 'How long does it take you to write a whole book?'

A: 'I think for a long time. Writing it would take a couple of days. Then it stays on the computer for about 2 months. I go back and change things.'

What stood out about Joy Cowley, now in her seventies, was the pure delight she transmitted to us all; the message that there are stories everywhere and to find them is to connect. We can all do that!

Joy Cowley is a very well-known children's author. She has written more than 600 titles and also co-wrote a children's reading programme called 'Story Box' with teacher/editor June Melser in the late 1970's. It was published by Shortland Publications, Auckland, NZ and then The Wright Group, USA. Joy is a patron and trustee of 'Storylines', the Children's Literature Foundation of New Zealand. She also writes books of spiritual reflection and is a retreat facilitator. She has written some adult novels too and recently completed a memoir called 'Navigation'.

(This information has been taken from her official website: <http://www.joycowley.com/>)

False Beliefs

by Louis Boulanger



Louis Boulanger

There are many false beliefs prevailing in the monetary realm today. I will briefly tackle two of what I consider to be today's many, quiet yet harmful, assumptions still being made even by those who should know better. Such assumptions block the road to natural progress and effectively keep us on the road to never-ending debt.

I could sense twelve years ago that something was seriously flawed with the global financial system, but could not quite figure it out. How could I? I had been trained to look in all the wrong places! Reading Peter Warburton's book *Debt & Delusion: Central Bank Follies that Threaten Economic Disaster*, in 2005 changed all that.

It made me seriously question the authenticity of our so called economic and financial achievements of recent times, as a society. It made me realise how deeply we had wandered into the "enchanted forest of financial sophistication", to use Warburton's elegant metaphor. Like a siren song, the scientification of financial markets gave us the illusion that every risk could be traded away.

In fact, there should be no further need for proof that ignorance rules the day in all matters economic than to observe the ongoing assertion from experts that deficits don't matter. It boggles the mind to see how many still seem to cling to such a destructive delusion. Unfortunately, the perpetrators of this false belief appear to be knowledgeable people. But are they?

For knowledge to manifest, reason must be operating. The very assertion that deficits don't matter does not in itself seem very reasonable. What is a deficit? Broadly, it can be defined as an excess of expenditure over revenue or the amount by which a sum of money falls short of the required or the expected amount. In other words, a deficit represents a deficiency of some sort, an actual imbalance of payments. Unsettled deficits, if they persist, can only bring disorder.

Of course, common sense tells us that deficits do matter. Unfortunately, it has been taken for granted for far too long by men of the highest degree of education that they don't. As a result, human action has been

misdirected long enough for bad habits to come in the way of progress. Disorderly fiscal and monetary policies have become the order of the day. Much unlearning must now take place before the truth of the matter can again be recognised.

It has been very convenient for some to fabricate and maintain the illusion that deficits don't matter and that we can continue to live beyond our means, without ever having to face the consequences. Indeed, how attractive

a delusion!

Of course, deferring the inevitable is easy; dealing with it is an altogether

different matter. So, how can we deal with it?

Well, let's see: a delusion is a belief held with strong conviction despite superior evidence to the contrary. So, we should first of all obviously take great care with what we choose as our personal convictions! Montesquieu expressed this well, I think, when he said: *"The tyranny of a prince in an oligarchy is not as dangerous to the public welfare as the apathy of a citizen in a democracy"*.

In economics, it is often the case that what applies in aggregate does not necessarily apply to all individuals equally. The burden

of debt is one such phenomenon. Take, for instance, the errors into which the assumption that deficits don't matter for governments led us to think that spending more than we earn must not matter either.

Debt servicing for a state is not the same as for individuals. Why is that? Well, to start with: only the state has the power to raise taxes to help with servicing that debt. You and I only have the fruits of our own labour to do so. But if that was the only difference,

things would not be as bad as they are.

Unfortunately, the currency in which all debt is denominated

is also under the control of the state. Worse still, legal tender laws make sure that you and I have no choice but to use that very currency to pay our debts and taxes. To add insult to injury, states also have a central bank that has exclusive rights to issue the currency and they do it with impunity with their proverbial 'printing presses'.

This brings us to the other dangerous assumption people make when it comes to monetary matters, which I want to briefly address. People assume that central bankers know exactly what they are doing, believe that they are always considering all possible

"It is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society."

- Jiddu Krishnamurti (1895 – 1986)

Louis Boulanger is an actuary, investment strategist and an avowed advocate for a return to sound money. He moved from Canada to New Zealand in 1986 with his wife, Louiise. They have two adult sons, Martin and Philippe who were born in New Zealand.

Louis has been coming to the School of Philosophy since 1999 and is a member of the Board of Trustees of Ficino School. He has also been a student of monetary history since 2004. He travels extensively and is becoming a well known speaker on the international speaking circuit. He writes a newsletter on the ongoing monetary disorder and the role of gold. His email address is loiuis@lbnw.co.nz.

consequences of their actions and, of course, act at all times only in our best interests. Unfortunately, it seems that belief is not only widely held but well entrenched especially in academic circles.

Central bankers are indeed master illusionists. That, I will gladly concede. But they certainly cannot accomplish miracles. Do they know what they are doing? Well, they assume they do, assuming that the theories under which they operate will work in practice. As for the possibility of any unintended consequences, this is generally left for their successors to deal with later on.

Now, you may at this stage be inferring that I dislike central bankers. Nothing could be further from the truth! It's just that I happen to know that one of them once famously said that the last duty of a central banker is to tell the public the truth... So you see, hiding behind the presumption that what they do is simply too complex for us to understand, makes it all very convenient for them.

Meanwhile, time ticks along, the debt problem remains unsolved and we remain either confused or deluded. Peter Warburton expressed this very well in his book:

“There is an interval of time between cause and effect which can sometimes be so short as to deem worthless an understanding of the process connecting them. Knowing that the

pulling of the trigger precedes the release of a bullet provides scant opportunity to take evasive action. In the case of the consequences of an over-accumulation of debt, the opposite problem presents itself. Sometimes the interval between cause and effect appears to be so long as to separate them by oceans of doubt.”

Indeed, in economics there can be a long lag between cause and effect. Take the present global financial crisis, for instance. It can be described as a debt crisis, as it often is these days. But its true nature is a monetary crisis. At its roots, is a landmark decision made in 1971. That year, gold was exiled internationally from the monetary system. As a result, gold has been prevented ever since from discharging its natural function as the ultimate extinguisher of debt.

Debt, I'm afraid, is today's contemporary manifestation of indentured slavery; it ensures our servitude to the system. Mortgages are the most insidious kind of debt, which reminds me: the word derives from French and means 'death pledge'! Ah, imagine society today if even only these two conceited false beliefs (that deficits don't matter and that central bankers know what they are doing) were shattered once and for all, let alone all the other false beliefs about money...

A special thanks...

... to those who gave generously to assist in the preparation of this issue, particularly with photographs.

Also thank you to the 'Vision' team – Nicolette Farrelly (editor), Selwyn Daniels (proof reader), Marilyn Marshall (editing) and Andrew Iten (layout).

If you would like to contribute to Vision, contact Nicolette Farrelly
Ph: 834-5408; Email: farrelly@orcon.net.nz

2012 Plato Week

by Matthew Roscoe

In mid-January, the Auckland School again hosted a “Plato” week, led by Mr and Mrs Horan from Dublin, aided by Mrs Marita Brewster from Melbourne and Mr. Preston and Mrs. Beanland from Auckland.

“I went down yesterday to the Piraeus with Glaucon the son of Ariston that I might offer up my prayers to the goddess...”

So begins The Republic, Plato’s best known work and the basis of this year’s Plato residential in Auckland. Truth to be told, we only covered a small portion. It was enough, though. Looking back, I doubt I can do justice to the event. There was so much, both in quality and quantity and I feel sure that other participants are going to wonder that I managed to omit so much.

So.... this is my personal view of the highlights.

1. The value of disciplined study. We met daily in groups to read and discuss a section of the text. There was an injunction to not use philosophy-speak, not to couch our thoughts and speech in terms of what we think we already know from decades of life in school. That in itself was a god-send. To have in Mr Horan an instant reference to the original Greek was another. We discussed the material as peers, not in the traditional tutor/student context. People engaged with each other, thought and spoke freely. It was a lot of fun.



Elizabeth Crompton & Jenny Connor

2. What do you really know? How much knowledge do your senses really provide and how much is your own interpretation? Have another look. And another. We had to.



David Horan speaking with Emilie Preston & Jenny Laird

3. Ignorance is partial knowledge. It is never wholly without some knowledge, never wholly pure knowledge. Opinion is based on partial knowledge. Which means opinion is... Ouch!

4. The question is as important, if not more important, than the answer. We approached this in several ways. Most engaging was Mr Horan’s little anecdote (hopelessly misquoted): *“And what will you do with a new piece of knowledge anyway? Put it in your little box of treasures then take it out to admire it and put it back again. You don’t need another little piece of knowledge.”*

We also approached this concept in a more disciplined way. Questions were put to us to reflect on, the instruction being *“Rest with the question, if an answer presents itself, let it pass and return to resting with the question.”*

Easy, huh? OK, try this question: *“Is there one; are there many?”* Or *“What is it that I love and will devote the whole of my life and efforts to?”* Try not having ideas about that! And yet, the effect of the discipline was sublime.

5. Dialectic. This concept has been bouncing around in the School for some time now. As an optional extra, we had mid-afternoon study groups led by Marita Brewster and Mrs Horan on dialectic with plenty of practice which helped make it real. No, much more than real. In my little box of treasures, I cherish the memory of several conversations with other men that were free from ego, positioning, debate, rhetoric, anecdote, spuriousness, abstraction; all the protective tactics we commonly deploy. Honest, intimate and free in the pursuit of the truth in the subject, whatever it was. I loved that. I really loved that.

6. The “public” lecture. One evening, Mr Horan gave a lecture to the general school. ‘268’ was packed. I spoke to several other students that night. Every single one said the same thing: “That was exciting!” They were right.

Digby Crompton, June Wells & Ngaire Bennett



Cynthia Koks & Ngaire Bennett

7. Plotinus. Challenging, and in Mr. Horan’s words *“majestic”*, Plotinus represents the zenith of the Greek neo-platonists. It was a personal joy to meet others who were already familiar with and studying his work.

8. Humility. It would be hard not to be affected by Mr Horan’s innate humility and by the end of the week it would have been ignoble to not be humble too, for by then, we too had been “down to the Piraeus” to offer up our prayers.



Suzanne Spence & Margaret Brickland

I believe it is being held again next year. I’ll be going. I’d be a mug not to.

15th Year Alumni Celebration

Ficino School celebrated its 15th birthday with its first Alumni gathering on May 25th. The occasion brought together a large number of current and past students and parents who enjoyed an evening of conversing, wining and dining.



Peter Crompton speaking to some past students

The outstanding tenor of the evening was friendship and love. There is something to be said for a small school community. That smallness and intimacy coupled with the values in the education seems to bring out genuine camaraderie and warmth.

Peter Crompton, headmaster of the school, gave a short address in which he reiterated the power and goodness of Ficino School and the reputation it is gaining in the wider community. Peter encouraged the connection with students who had graduated from Ficino to remain strong and asked former pupils to let the school know of their chosen careers and achievements



Jack Platt & Barry Preston

now and in the future.

Hamish Hudson, Head of the English Department, who spoke later, said that the alumni inspired the current students and their coming back to visit was of great benefit to the school. He also hoped that they would continue to keep in contact.

Lawrence Ames, Chairman of the Board of Trustees spoke of the value of an education which is underpinned by recourse to stillness, where children are shown, from a very young age, how to disconnect from the 'moving' mind.

The turnout to this event was exceedingly good and bodes well for similar events in the future.



Existing Library Photo



Original Library & New Library concept drawing

**Top Left to Bottom Right:
Rosemary & Kyra Innes-Jones & Ben Frost / Frances
Platt & Tracy Siva / Emilie Preston catching up with
some old friends / Rima Fenn, Bruce Watson &
Graham Farrelly**



Cultural Picnic 2012

by Liz Godfrey & Tessa Stephens

Between 80 and 90 people attended the cultural Picnic Day this year. By all accounts, it was a great success. Attendees praised the quality of the presentations, the concert, and the catering. Even the weather gods were merciful. High winds the day before had the organisers on tenterhooks but the day dawned fine, if a little bit brisk.

This year we had a diverse range of presentations. The titles alone give some idea of the variety on offer. The day began with 'Towards a New Renaissance', subtitled 'An Optimist's Guide to Modern History' by Tessa Stephens. People were then able to choose from four other presentations: 'Farther up and Further In: Christian, Medieval and Platonic thought in the writings of C S Lewis' presented by Hamish Hudson, 'The Gentle Art of Giving' by David Farrelly, 'Venice: Does Government Shape the People?' from Simon Laurent, and finally, 'The four Imperfect States described in Plato's Republic'. This was presented by Russell Allen.

Our guest lecturer this year was Dr. Leonie Holmes, one of New Zealand's foremost composers and a lecturer in music composition at the University of Auckland.



Tessa Stephens giving a talk on History

She treated us to a fascinating talk entitled 'The Musical Journey' and posed a number of questions such as, 'How do composers play with our expectations, manipulate dissonance, tension and release to take us on a musical journey? How do they use musical ingredients such as melody, harmony, rhythm and texture, and work with them in time?' Her lecture explored these questions with musical examples from a variety of composers from the 16th to the 21st Century.

After lunch, we were treated to a concert given by three very talented young people. Two were daughters of Dr. Holmes. They dazzled us with impressive performances. Rachel played a Bach suite on viola while Rebecca performed pieces by Gluck, Járdányi and Taffanel on the flute. Our own Hannah Bryant delighted the audience with a variety of songs including some she composed herself.

We asked our roving reporter, Liz Godfrey, to record some on-the-spot observations during the day. The following comments will indicate the quality of the fare provided and the appreciation it generated. Each of the comments below was from a different person.

The Presentations

- “To listen to someone who is passionate and inspired about their subject is a real pleasure.”
- “The talk on the art of giving reminded me that it is more rewarding than any other act – it makes good energy which goes around endlessly.”
- “I found Hamish’s talk inspiring – I didn’t know there were seven books in the Narnia series. I like being able to link the symbolism of the planets and gods with each of the books.”
- “I liked the range of ages in the Art of Giving talk from the attentive children to the oldest among us. Full attention by all.”

- “The talk on Plato’s four systems of government was thought-provoking and the discussion and question afterwards was also very stimulating.”



Rachel Holmes

- “Simon seemed to be asking how and why Venice has become as it is. At one time apparently the government didn’t let anyone stay in one role too long. It was quite democratic,



Hannah Bryant

- with a revolving council, and lots of checks and balances. Simon appeared to conclude that the system worked well because the populace had confidence in their leaders that we don’t have nowadays.”
- “I liked her quiet approach, very accessible and encouraging. Especially the imagery of the lighthouse and the candle. She provided us with a snapshot of centuries tied together.”
- “Hamish’s love of his subject was infectious and inspired. He transferred his love of CS Lewis to his audience and this love was complemented by the thoroughness and depth of his subject.”
- “I liked the reminder of the art of receiving a gift – not to be seen as a weakness – we need to be humble enough to receive an act of kindness.”
- “I really enjoyed the presentation on ‘Venice’. Having been there recently, the beautiful slides brought back many memories. The musical introduction provided a perfect background for Simon

to discuss what was clearly a well thought out set of propositions backed up by historical facts. Summing up, the presentation was interesting, informative and enjoyable.”

Music Lecture and Concert

- “I really enjoyed the lecture on the Musical Journey. Dr. Holmes has a delightfully natural way of speaking and delivering things clearly and simply. The musical excerpts and the little demos on the piano were very good – and often very amusing.”
- “What a treat! Those three young ladies were very impressive.”
- “In the stillness of the room the sound of the viola rose and fell with a clarity that I have rarely experienced. I heard the sound as if it was acting alone, without the aid of the soloist. It was easy to rest with the sound.”
- “As Hannah was singing, the phrase ‘the body is an instrument for our use’ arose – her voice was truly a beautiful instrument.”
- “For a young girl, the flautist showed huge talent. She played beautifully.”



- “What a delicious lunch! We were catered for most generously. You certainly wouldn’t get lunch, wine, two teas and such quality presentations for that price anywhere else!”

End-note

The Cultural Picnic has become an annual event in the Auckland School and fulfils many functions. It offers family and friends of our members a chance to meet and enjoy the magnificent venue. The views of the Tamaki estuary and gulf are truly inspiring. It also provides School members an incentive to develop their own interests and present their findings to others. The brief invites something of spiritual, cultural or philosophic value. This ensures an enriching day for all.

It also requires a degree of sacrifice on the part of those who service the event year after year. We would offer many thanks to that dedicated band who make it all possible.

All are welcome to join us again next year.



Catering

- “After driving up from Hamilton, this lovely morning tea is very welcoming.”

Bookshop News



by Geoff Long

Recently my eyes fell upon an old favourite which I haven't read for a while - "I Am That" by Nisargadatta. "I Am That", for those not familiar with this work, is a book written from recorded transcripts of conversations with all types of visitors to Nisargadatta's very humble flat above a small shop in Bombay. These conversations were transcribed by a man called Maurice Frydman in the early 1980's, and introduced Nisargadatta's teachings to the west.

Immediately on reopening the book I was reminded of the simple and direct approach to visitor's questions about spiritual life, happiness, the mind, emotions, work, meditation, and anything else arising from the multicultural audience. Like Plato, Nisargadatta uses the Dialectic approach of questioning to both open the view and expose the old habitual thinking patterns that follow us about like a shadow; of which we are seldom aware but which reveal our deepest thoughts and natures. It is interspersed with explanations, instruction, and advice in a refreshingly direct manner as the following quote on falling still and meditation indicates:

"You begin by letting thoughts flow and watching them. The very observation slows down the mind till it stops altogether. Once the mind is quiet, keep it quiet. Don't get bored with peace, be in it, go deeper into it".

And to the question "What makes us progress?" (in spiritual endeavours)

"Silence is the main factor. In peace and silence you grow".

If we can empathize with the question then perhaps the answer also applies to us.

New to the bookshop is a small pocket text by Swami Budhananda titled "The Mind and its Control". What appealed to me was the practicality of the presentation. Each chapter starts with an observation of what is easily recognized as an aspect of my 'mind'. This is followed by advice on the subject from Vedanta, Buddha, Vivekananda and Christ. However, and this was the appeal, he follows on by saying "OK this is the teaching but how are we to apply it in our busy daily lives"?, and goes on to help with simple instructions such as:

"Nothing is more exhausting than wrestling with the mind. The more we are exhausted the more turbulent the mind becomes; and ultimately we are swept away. In such a situation a frontal attack on the mind is not very helpful. What should we do then? We should cease to identify ourselves with the mind. If we do this a tremendous work will have been done".

So in those moments of wrestling with the mind why not pick up and enjoy a good book. There are new titles arriving in the bookshops all the time, ready to be discovered! All can help with peace and silence if allowed. Good reading!

NEWNEW***

CD's of the concert "Music is Sweeter than Honey" composed and performed by Cathy Dean of the Wellington School, are now available. For those who could not attend it is an excellent way of enjoying the event as well as giving well deserved support to our friend.

Any queries please email Geoff at: advasco@xtra.co.nz



Another Ficino School Fair Success

If the profits from the past two years are anything to go by, the Ficino School Fair has certainly become 'a must-do' event for many people. There is definitely a formula that works. It includes a very dedicated, hardworking group of people who not only put a lot of time and effort into the lead up to the Fair, but ensure that the day and the presentation of the stalls is high quality. It

is also a day when almost the whole school, parents and children are present and helping in some way. The atmosphere is traditional and welcoming and there is always a bargain to be found.

The abundance of delicious homemade preserves, and cakes. The variety of international food and the various stalls and activities - white elephant, books, toys, pre-loved clothing, produce, flowers and plants and great activities for the children, plus the giant Silent Auction with over sixty donated goods and services, provides something for everyone.



For two years running we have made a profit of around \$40,000. Impressive with a roll of 125 students! As with all fundraising in the school the profit was evenly divided between funds towards the upcoming Europe trip in September and our fantastic new library extension, which is now complete. Changing rooms have also been put in for the students as well as new carpet in the senior part of the school.

If you missed this year's event come along next year on March 24th!

SEE YOU THERE!



In the Image of God

by Lawrence Ames



Notre Dame

A recent visit to Europe provided a refreshing and inspiring reminder of the enduring faith that is natural to mankind. The places we visited were richly adorned with examples of the creative skill and enterprise of individuals and civilisations dating back over the ages, each seeking to give expression to their innermost faith and belief.

Ranging in form from grand cathedrals, conceived and constructed over a period of generations, to simple paintings dedicating a street name to a Saint or religious leader, the variety and extent of these creative works was enriching for this traveller. Each creation gave form to the heartfelt belief or image of God perceived by the artist

There were many paintings, frescoes, sculptures, fountains and monuments depicting the triumphs and tragedies that societies and individuals have endured in the support of their beliefs. The strength to stand up and fight for honest beliefs against sometimes barbarous opposition has been richly recorded in creative works and deserves our respect. The Renaissance era generated many fine examples of creative endeavour each seeking to give expression to the universal love, beauty and aspiration of the human spirit. From concept to construct the designs are divine and the artistic skills angelic.

Mankind over the ages has also sought to create spaces that reflect the limitless sanctity of the human heart, places worthy of honest belief and worship. What else could give rise to the wondrous cathedrals, abbeys and

basilicas that grace these ancient lands? Some of these structures are glorious both outside and

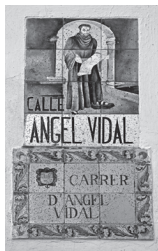
inside, others are unremarkable on the outside but inside are spectacularly spacious, full of ethereal light, richly adorned with paintings and sculptures creating an atmosphere of tangible peace and rest amidst the sometimes chaotic external environment.

Travel is certainly educational and enjoyable, providing direct experience of the richness and variety of other cultures. It is a powerful reminder of the glorious heritage available to us all. To isolate a private life or our national history of less than two hundred years from the wonder of this ancient heritage would be myopic in the extreme.

The experience of just a few weeks visiting Europe has provided a strong reminder that in our everyday actions we can seek to strengthen our own resolve and seek to emulate the profound examples of human faith, honesty, creative skill and endurance that enrich and uplift human civilisation.

Lord Shri Krishna has told us that “in sacrificial action the all pervading Spirit is consciously present”; by refining the artistry of our own actions we can give expression to the image of God in our heart.

And the pizzas were heavenly!



Street Sign

Attachment

by Geoff Taylor

In the early eighties the desire arose to discover and penetrate truth and the search began with a Buddhist book called 'The Way of Non Attachment' by a monk called Dhiravamsa. At the time I was so thankful that this book had literally fallen into my hands because it made such a great impact in the years to follow.

My partner was also awestruck by the book and together we embarked on a journey to discover this Essence known as Truth. A path that led us to many lectures and silent retreats where we learned walking and sitting meditation and Vipassana meditation as well as other disciplines that helped in the process of letting go of what we are not.

We were able to do this for ten years and then as the meetings and gatherings of the monks became more scarce we knew it was time to investigate this inner nature with more vigour which brought us to the School of Philosophy which offered more regular meetings and a chance for more frequent satsanga or good company.

At one of the Buddhist meetings we were very privileged to have satsanga with a well known monk who had studied with Thich Nhat Hanh a Thai monk of great renown. His name was Venerable Ajahn Sumedho and attending satsanga with him was very special. It was a privilege to be in his company.

He related a little story to us which I would love to share with you. It is a quote which comes directly from his book 'The Four Noble Truths':

"When you find yourself attached, remember that 'letting go' is not 'getting rid of' or throwing away'. If I'm holding onto this clock and you say, 'Let go of it!' that doesn't mean 'throw it out'. I may think that I have to throw it away because

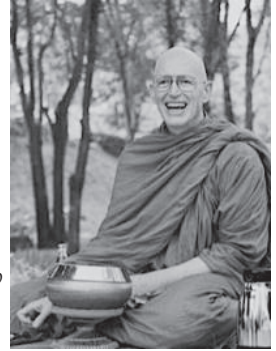
I'm attached to it, but that would just be the desire to get rid of it. We tend to think that getting rid of the object is a way of getting rid of attachment. But if I contemplate attachment, this grasping of the clock, I realise that there is no point in getting rid of it - it's a good clock; it keeps good time and is not heavy to carry around. The clock is not the problem. The problem is grasping the clock. So what do I do?

Let it go, lay it aside--put it down gently without any kind of aversion. Then I can pick it up again, see what the time is and lay it aside when necessary.

You can apply this insight into 'letting go' to the desire for sense pleasures. Maybe you want to have a lot of fun. How would you lay aside that desire without aversion? Simply recognise the desire without judging it. You can contemplate wanting to get rid of it -- because you have such a foolish desire--but just lay it aside.

Then, when you see it as it is, recognised that it is just desire, you are no longer attached to it."

Luang Por Sumedho is the senior Western disciple of Ajahn Chah, the revered Thai meditation master. He was born in Seattle, Washington, in 1934. After serving four years in the US Navy as a medic, he completed a BA in Far Eastern Studies and a MA in South Asian Studies. In 1966, he went to Thailand to practice meditation at Wat Mahathat in Bangkok. Not long afterwards, he went forth as a novice monk in a remote part of the country, Nong Khai, before receiving full ordination in 1967. Picture and short biography care of: <http://www.lifebalanceinstitute.com>



Practical Philosophy

An introductory course of nine sessions is offered for those who seek an understanding of the nature of human existence and the world in which we live.

The course, which includes the opportunity for discussion, outlines the practical application of great philosophic ideas, past and present.

When these ideas are put into practice they lead towards Self knowledge, clear thought, and effective action in work, study and every aspect of human life.

The Term 3 course commences Tuesday 24th July or Thursday 26th July.

The Term 4 course commences Tuesday 16th October or Thursday 18th October.

You can attend any of the venues and times indicated below.

27 Esplanade Rd, Mt Eden

Tuesday – 9.30am or 7.45pm

Thursday – 7.45pm

North Shore, Massey University Study Centre

37 Fred Thomas Drive, Barry's Point, Takapuna.

Thursday 7.15pm

Hamilton

Parents Centre, 87 Boundary Road, Claudlands.

Tuesday 7.15pm

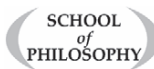
Course fee is \$150 for nine weeks.

To enrol, simply turn up 15 to 20 minutes before start time, or you can enrol online.

For further information

www.philosophy.school.nz

or call us toll free on **0800 610 539**



A registered Charitable Organisation. Established 1960