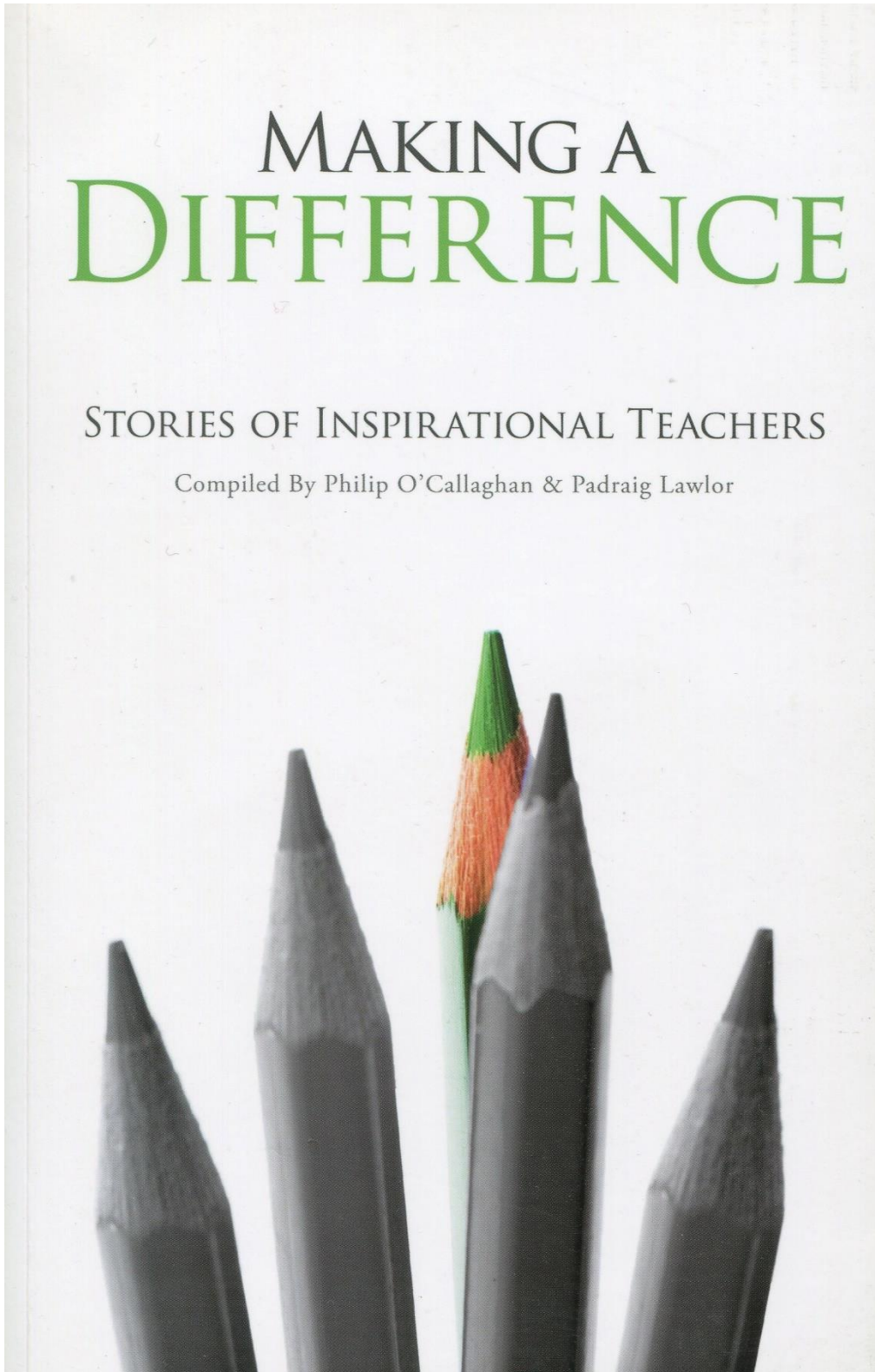


Making a Difference, 2012, ISBN 978-0-9570161-0-1

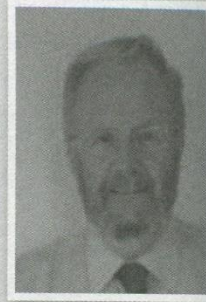
MAKING A DIFFERENCE

STORIES OF INSPIRATIONAL TEACHERS

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A VERY FINE HUMAN BEING

In the classrooms that I attended in the 1960s, when corporal punishment by cane and leather was still a culturally accepted practice, Brother Patrick McCann stood out as an exceptional educator.

He sought, sometimes with difficulty, to engage teenage minds with life's big ideas and questions. Whether the subject was French, English, Latin or Religious Knowledge, you sensed that he was deeply immersed in the subject matter. Brother Patrick spoke about the work of Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, St. Luke the Evangelist, Shakespeare, Kierkegaard, Camus and dozens of other thinkers as if they were his personal friends. I imagined him comfortably engrossed in conversation with them on a regular basis.

Of course, his daily encounters were not only with these learned scholars but with bunches of schoolboys in De La Salle College,

Churchtown in Dublin. Initially, some of us were slow to respond to his refined, gentle manner and incisive mind. We tested him. But, in time, we began to appreciate his uniqueness. I loved the way he always tried to appeal to the better side of human nature, how his inclination was to encourage rather than to criticise, how he refused to enlist fear as a motivator for learning.

For someone who knew so much, he always seemed open to learning more, especially from and about his students. He seemed genuinely interested in what we had to say. He listened attentively, often fascinated and occasionally appalled, at our opinions on a range of topics.

At first, I was disappointed that Brother Patrick seemed to have little interest in sport. But then, when a rugby team of some promise hit a crisis, his response spoke volumes about the man. 'I believe you need a trainer,' he began his address to a sceptical squad of players. 'I know very little about this game but I am prepared to learn, especially from you.' I suspect that his night-time reading of the classics was displaced by some plodding through sports manuals, for a while anyway. In time his players grew to respect his growing expertise, humility and humanity.

He also saw sport as an opportunity to extend our horizons and challenge our prejudices. He brought us to Belfast to play against Protestant opponents at a time when there was little cross-border contact between schools. We met our counterparts from a De La Salle School near Manchester not only on the playing fields but in our homes and in theirs.

I also remember his bringing in theologians to talk about the hope being brought to the world by the Second Vatican Council and the promise of ecumenism. There was also his dedicated editing of an annual school magazine *Wine and Gold* and many other positive memories.

His former students will recall Brother Patrick's distinctive,

calligraphic-like handwriting style on page and on blackboard. It was no coincidence that many invested in Osmiroid 65s and Platignum italic pens at that time. Some even continue to use fountain pens with curious chisel-tipped nibs to this day!

We are fortunate that some of his past students published a collection of Brother Patrick's writings. I find it fascinating now to glimpse aspects of his thinking and relate them to particular school events, even to individual classes. His unease with the status quo is evident. For example, he talked about his difficulties in living with 'the simplistic nationalism and conventional Catholicism of the de Valera years'. But then, later, his discomfort was with 'the anti-national and anti-religious invective of our Irish intelligensia'. In the early 1960s he wrote that 'it is an unhealthy symptom in a community when there is a gross discrepancy between what is commonly thought and what is publicly said'. He longed for more vigorous public debate, especially in relation to education. He pointed out that the Enquiry into the Secondary School Curriculum (1962) was notable for 'what it failed to say and needed saying'.

In that article, published in *Studies*, we can see an educator's ability to address broad policy issues as well as appreciating the day-to-day detail involved in operating a busy school. His dissatisfaction with the curriculum of the time is obvious. He saw it as over-crowded, lacking in variety and not conducive to the development of individual students or schools. Elsewhere he wrote against academic competitiveness and premature specialisation, favouring a broad, liberal education.

His writings illuminate other aspects of his personal educational philosophy. You can see flashes of his passion for teaching and learning as person-to-person communication. His rejection of a ritual transmission of information is evident. He is unequivocal that teaching always has a double thrust 'towards the cognitive and towards the affective'. Brother Patrick was in no doubt that teaching is a serious moral enterprise that offers to the young mind, truth and to the young heart, goodness.

One brief example is instructive. He talks about the teacher exploring a text – the examples he cites are Jane Austen or Fyodor Dostoyevsky – in dialogue with his or her students. He writes eloquently about developing a classroom atmosphere where the humanity of the characters is explored together in ways that assist students to appreciate that their own role in life is not as observers but as players. He continues:

“It is in the mental, emotional and imaginative ferment thus created that the young begin to mature, to question life, to search for meaning and purpose in it. It is in exchanges such as these between teacher and pupil that we witness that development of the pupil’s nature, that formation of intellect and will, of mind and heart, which is the very stuff of and essence of education.”

To this enterprise, as Brother Patrick saw it, the teacher brings intellectual gifts, moral principles, ideals and values and “whatever wisdom and goodness life has taught” to whomever is being taught. In other words, the teacher’s humanity – in all its complexity – is central to good teaching. As he put it: “A good man, a good woman, a good human being is the indispensable *point de départ* for the good teacher.”

His students in Churchtown and also, I suspect, in Roscommon, Waterford and Castletown, in Pendleton in Lancashire, in Johannesburg, South Africa and in New South Wales, Australia and, finally, in the Education Department in Maynooth, were fortunate to have encountered and be influenced by not only a great teacher but a very fine human being. Or, as he described himself, in the Introduction to his collected writings: an Irishman, a Catholic, a religious, and a teacher, a European man also, who loved not only his own historic nation but the ancients and the Gauls and the Franks as well, and who did not hate the English.