

You'll never walk alone

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Over the past five years I have grown accustomed to be one of the Talking Heads at this ceremonious beginning of the school year. Usually my contribution consists of a little story and then a moralistic coda. Don't worry – it won't take long.

I hope you had a good holiday – if any. My holiday consisted of me and my family staying in the Lake District in England. Mainly to drive like mad up and down to Liverpool a couple of times to see Liverpool FC play a match against Torino. To see Van Dijk and Wijnaldum and the great Mo Salah in action. To check whether Keita and Firmino were value for money. To do the Anfield Stadium tour. In general, I was – apart from buying Beatles souvenirs - busy humming “You'll never walk alone” for two entire weeks.

“Walk on, walk on, with love in your heart,
'Cause you'll never walk alone
You'll never walk alone”

Of course the holiday gives you lots of opportunities to have extended talks with your children. At some point, I was talking about the future with my oldest son, who is 13. He said that one of the things he might consider was to become a music teacher. I understand: he likes music, he is good with kids and very social, and he has excellent music teachers at his school. That helps.

And also, I don't worry too much. I guess at some point it will fade away, and he will do something less outrageous: just become a vlogger, or a fireman, or a professional football player.

But I didn't tell him. I thought: suppose one of my kids would, later, go study at a conservatoire. Suppose he or she would be sitting in my audience. What would they like me to say? And, more important: what would I like to say to them?

I would probably tell them what I told in the ceremonies the past five years. I would tell a little story they might like. Maybe about my holiday, and about football. I would include singing a little song, to show that I really belong in a conservatoire. And I would, definitely, go for the moralistic coda. Because that is what parenting is about. And it is what education is about.

I will tell you a little secret about what education is about. I learned it from a man called Gert Biesta. He is very famous, but not amongst musicians usually. The secret is this. You, students, probably think that a school, like this conservatoire for example, is about learning. You want to learn to become an even better musician, teacher, composer, conductor. And you want to learn it in this building.

But that is not the case. School is not about learning. School is about teaching. It is simple. Learning is something you do all the time, everywhere. You don't need schools to learn. Teaching, however, is only done in schools, by teachers.

The essence of the school is the teacher.

I can imagine you, students, are disappointed now. You maybe thought the school was about you. You maybe hoped we would be student-centred. You hoped we would offer you personalized training programmes, and education on demand. And there you are: on the first day of your new year as a student, you are told school is not about you. It is about the teachers.

And of course, my colleagues are happy. Finally someone who understands!

I will, again, tell you a secret. I learned it from Gert Biesta too. He says: the school is about the teacher. That makes being a teacher a ridiculously difficult and responsible job. Because what you teach is a gift. A gift only consists if it is accepted. And a gift can also be refused. In which case, nothing happens.

So, students, there we go. The teacher is going to give you a gift. How does he know it is going to be accepted? He doesn't. He can only do his best. Can you help him? Yes. It helps if the teachers get to know you. Because if you really know someone, it is easier to think of a gift.

A small U-turn, but there we are: the student, after all, is the centre of education – if not of the universe. If students wait passively for the teachers to give their gifts, they will receive nothing of value. If students show the teacher who they are, why they do what they do, where they come from, where they would like the world to go, the teachers can think of the fitting gift.

So that's what I would like to say to you – or, if they were here, to my kids. Getting an education consists of showing your teachers who you really are, so that they can think of the best gift ever. If you don't show them, or if they don't listen to you, they will only come up with a lousy look-alike of real education.

Getting an education is hard work. Hard work for you, hard work for the teachers, hard work for the school. And getting an education is basically not about careers, about becoming the best, about value for money. At the bottom line of education stand words like trust, empathy, compassion. The will not only to become better musicians, but to become better human beings. The will to share your talent and move the world. To share your talent and move your students, if you are a teacher. Or, if you are a student: to share your talent and move your teacher.

It requires from all of us, in the words of my favorite author Marilynne Robinson, to realize that “when you encounter another person, when you have dealings with anyone at all, it is as if a question is being put to you”.

If asking honest questions and trying to give honest answers is what all of us will be up to, here, I guess we will provide ourselves with an education that will make sure we will never walk alone.

I wish you a great year.