One must take care of one's Wantok's: What can we learn?

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I am delighted to write the opening article for *Teaching and Learning*. I have followed its development from inception and applaud its' success. The articles are always informative and full of resources while maintaining that requisite academic tone. They always manage to impart a very personal and reflective view of the topic under study. I have known Ray Chodzinski for almost forty years and together we have spent many a long night, over good scotch, discussing issues and concerns that affect student learning. So, it is here, that I share, rather than profess, a reflective perspective, and a thought or two, about child and teen health and safety in schools from a perspective far removed from the experiences of most readers of *Teaching and Learning*. Yet, hidden in this reflection are perhaps a few gleanings that might prompt others to make additional reflections and associations.

It is strange how ideas associate. While reading Lorenzo Cherubini's article on "Functional Literacy in Schools," in the Winter/Spring edition of *Teaching and Learning*, I was transported back many years in thought, to a dark night when I stood on the banks of the mighty Yalingi river in North West Papua, New Guinea. It was then that I wondered how I would cross its raging waters to reach my home on the other side. I had crossed in the opposite direction earlier that day

when the river was knee high. I anticipated no problem on my return nor would there have been if the waters were only waist or chest high. Perhaps some discomfort, but no real danger. I was wrong. Unanticipated rain raised the level of the river to flood waters over my head. Now how would I cross? Bridge? None! Causeway? None! Ferry? None! One crossed the Yalingi on foot or you stayed put.

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I had more or less resigned myself to spending the night in my truck when a group of Melanesians from a nearby village showed up. They were parishioners and had been in town to play in a football championship. The team performed well and all were in a jubilant mood and equally good spirit. They related excitedly how they had out played their archrivals, and then one of them seemed to size up the situation. "Yu laik brukim wara, fada ("You want to cross, Father?") I acknowledged that I did but did not see how. "Nogat wari, Fada. Mepela

i lukautim yu" ("No problem, we'll take care of you"). The contents of my pockets were given to a young woman in the group who put them in her *bilum* (string bag). She lifted the *bilum* over her head and danced through the torrent shrieking with laughter at the good fun of it all. Then it was my turn. My saviours instructed me to place my arms around the necks of two of the biggest members of the team, to hold on tightly, and do nothing else. We slid into the flood and after what seemed an eternity of swirling torrents, periods of total immersion interspersed with surfacing to gasp for breath, we reached the other side; me like a wet rag, they ready to walk on another five miles to their village.

Even Lorenzo, if he is reading this, must be wondering what it has to do with his reflections on functional literacy, even more so resilience and child safety and health. Yet, here were people whose formal education, at best, would probably have ended with elementary school but who had developed the skills to give them resilience within their environment. They had shown their ability to cope with a flooded river that had left me helpless. Even the language we used, Tok Pisin, is a *lingua franca* evolved to enable the 700 language groups (in a population of five million) to communicate with each other and with the immigrants, missionaries, traders, and professionals who travel to their country. Strangely, some among the immigrants mock the language but few countries with such a polyglot population have managed so effectively. Most children grow up speaking at least three languages: the local village tongue (Tok Ples), the *lingua franca* (Tok Pisin) and a smattering of English picked up at school and by listening to the radio.

While the capacity to cope with a river in flood makes for a good adventure story, or missionary yarn, it is almost peripheral to the system and customs that give these people their true resilience in the face of a harsh environment, which, until recently, had few of the tools that the western world takes for granted. Foremost among these customs is the wantok community (literally people of the same traditional language). It is an absolute imperative that one must take care of one's "wantoks." So much so, that the first Christmas I was in country so to speak, I had suggested that we have some kind of fund raising or food drive to care for the less fortunate in our parish. I was quietly taken aside by an elderly woman who admonished me by saying that such a collection would not be necessary since "no one is in need in our villages." The wantok system took care of that. If someone was sick or fell on hard times the village gathered to ensure he/she was looked after. If a member of the village arrived at the door of a wantok in some distant town, hospitality is immediate and the visitor invited to stay as long as he/she desires without contributing to the host family. It would be the height of bad manners, and deeply insulting, to even hint at moving on.

It is often asked of me if New Guinea mothers love their children as much as mothers who live in the so called more modern societies of the world. How does one respond to such a question; how does one compute the level of love? A few practical examples might point tentatively towards an assessment. In New Guinea, abortion is rare. Children are wanted and valued. As infants, they are carried everywhere strapped to the mother's back or side. New Guinea women are hor-

rified to see children placed for long periods, in prams or strollers. They wonder how those babies can hear their mother's heart beat. They say without that they cannot understand how a child will develop and grow properly. Even children born out of wedlock are, after a suitable period of tut-tutting, integrated into the community. Big families were not motivated by religious or economic principles. Their experience led them to believe that a significant number (perhaps the majority) of their children would die before reaching maturity. They needed to ensure that some would be around to look after them in their old age. "Who will hold me when I'm dying?" they would sometimes ask. A large family seemed to be the answer.

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At the other end of life's existence, a similar regard for the importance (sanctity) of the person is evident. It was impossible for me to explain the placing of elderly in retirement homes. No matter what I said to communicate this concept words failed. Simply put the people of New Guinea have no mental category with which to grasp this reality. For them the aged are the bearers of wisdom and are the repositories of the stories of the tribe or group. It would be unthinkable to set them aside. With their wantoks they are secure.

While in New Guinea, I became fascinated by the extent of their knowledge of the environment in which they lived. They could rattle off the names of every tree and flower in the bush together with a

commentary on the characteristics of each especially those, which were useful for building or for medical purposes. They knew which plants were edible and those to avoid. When thirsty they would simply shin up a tree, lop off a few coconuts (kulau) and refresh themselves with the juice (no need for coffee shops). The approach of the people to medicine was "holistic"; they were convinced that physical ailments could not be properly cured without also treating the spirit. I remember one time a group passing through the mission carrying a young man completely paralysed. They were bringing him back from hospital to die at home. I prayed with them (the sick man did not get up and walk!), gave them refreshments and a blanket for the patient as they set off by canoe for their village. I did not expect to see the young man again so imagine my surprise to be greeted by him on a visit to their village a short time later.

What had happened? It seems that when the party returned home the Glasmen (healers) decided to try again. Bit by bit they drew the story from the depths of his subconscious. Some days before he had broken a very strict village taboo. Under the cover of darkness, he had crawled, undetected, to the Haus Karim (sort of maternity ward) to peer through a crack at his newly born son. (The Haus Karim was absolutely off limits to men). Next morning he awoke paralysed but without any memory of his escapade. He was rushed to hospital where the medical staff was totally at a loss to diagnose his case. After the glasmen had finished their work he was suitably reprimanded, giving a penance and restored to full health.

The movement of waters, tides, undertows and the travels of fish was information not recorded in books but told as stories which helped them to move around safely and to eat well. Although both adults and children spent much time on and in the water, drowning was very rare. I often watched the men when they had finished a day's fishing on the Pacific Ocean sitting patiently in their canoes waiting for the wave that would carry them to the shore in safety and then, as one, paddling furiously to catch it as it crested. Not all waves are equal. Catch the wrong one, or the right one awkwardly, and the day's catch, together with the fishermen, ended up on the ocean floor. This fate was what often befell less knowledgeable "white skins" in their motorboats. Children played in the surf with pure abandonment and glee. Why, because they knew that all adults, not just one or two were always on guard, looking out for them. This sense of protection and assurance of safety dominated village life. Adults protected and looked after their own children but also any child who happened by or was in need.

So what is the point of this reflection? First, we should be very careful about labelling as "primitive" people who lack running water, reliable electricity, flush toilets, two car garages or even footwear. They may be traditional or primal but hardly primitive (this latter title is much more appropriate to describe those who would drop nuclear bombs on civilian women and children). All the communities that I was fortunate to be a part of demonstrated an uncanny love of children and elders, respect for family and community and displayed a dignified perspective about social issues and justice. The community recognizes its' responsibility to its

dwellers and understands how these two important components of life are inseparably connected.

For the people of New Guinea family values are respected and members are supported from the cradle to the grave [and even after death by the tumbuna, (ancestors) who pick up the task]. Local knowledge is extensive and enables them to use their resources accumulated over thousands of years of existence without pressure on the environment, the village or the community as a whole. By respecting and reflecting upon the natural world and the varied characteristics of people they, as a people have achieved wisdom, grace and a sense of the spiritual. Maybe we can learn from them and other primal people such as our own "First Nations" An interesting fact to consider is that although there was no compulsory education most children attended elementary school and those who could afford the fees continued onwards. Perhaps the notion of no child left behind might well have started in Papua, New Guinea!

Michael Doyle was born in Ireland. He joined the Spiritans, (a missionary congregation of the Holy Spirit) in 1949 with the intention of becoming

a priest assigned to Africa. Instead, he was sent to Canada. He was principal of Neil McNeil High School and subsequently Dean of Students at

Centennial College. Later he spent many years in the rainforests of Papua New Guinea. Next, he travelled extensively engaged in service to young seminarians around the globe, including Africa. Fr. Doyle has held various administrative posts within the Spiritan Congregation including Provincial at Rome for six years. He completed his seminarian work, undergraduate and teaching degrees in Ireland. He holds an M.Ed from Ontario Institute of Studies in Education, University of Toronto and a doctorate from Dukane University, Chicago. Currently he engages in pastoral work, writing, musing with his friends and colleagues and attempting to play golf.

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Father Michael Doyle recently authored a book titled: *What am I doing here?* It is a fascinating, personalized introspective reflection of his Holy calling and life long journey as a priest, educator and third world missionary.

Proceeds from the sale of the book will be donated to Sancta Maria House, dedicated to assisting young women in difficulty. The book is published by *editions Soleil publishing inc.* and can be purchased from the Spiritan Provincial Office, 121 Victoria Ave, Toronto, Ontario, M4E 3S2. Ph: 416-698-2003 ext. 24, email:

bursar@spiritans.com. If you are looking for a great read or a special gift, this is it.