

# The Spirit of TASIS

By David Jepson

Talking with a former TASIS England teacher and administrator recently, I was astonished by something he said. “After all these years,” he said (and it has been several since he was here), “TASIS still feels like my spiritual centre.” That was quite a thing to say. I’m not sure that very many other people would put it like that. But at the same time, I *am* sure that quite a few would understand what he meant.

TASIS as a spiritual centre or spiritual home – the concept raises a number of questions. Is it like this at other international schools? Why would a school give rise to a feeling like this? And what does it even mean?

It seems risky even to ruminate about this, much less write about it. One feels immediately bogged down in a quicksand of clichés and trite metaphors, including that one. Fumes of nostalgia paralyse the synapses. It’s a struggle to think straight.

Yes, the Rigg Library was once a chapel for Anglican nuns; yes, the church next door back in the Middle Ages was an outpost of Chertsey Abbey, which at the time had great national religious influence; and yes, at Commencement, the traditional closing prayer is one that has a long legacy from generations of educators in the Fleming family. But these lineaments of piety are surely not the heart of the matter.

Despite the risks, I would hazard to suggest that the idea of a palpable spiritual centre at TASIS could have three contributing features.

First, the place matters. Mrs Fleming is on record as saying that she always chose places of exceptional beauty for her school campuses because she valued beauty in education so highly. She seemed intuitively to accept Plato’s claim in *The Republic* that education in an environment of grace and beauty will prepare the young person to give welcome to the dawning of reason. Visitors to TASIS schools, whether in Thorpe or Montagnola, invariably comment on the loveliness of the settings, and as the campus master plans continue to be realised, things are only getting better.

As a thought experiment, imagine turning TASIS into a virtual school where students somehow took TASIS courses without being present here. The idea just doesn’t compute. TASIS is not something that can be transmitted online. In a time when many seem to be exploring ways to decontextualize education into a commoditised abstraction or to take advantage of modern technologies by making connections with places and people in the world, TASIS looks in the opposite direction. Students from all over the world are invited to come to this place, where education flourishes in a particular community. It’s centripetal instead of centrifugal. Without the campus and the community, there could still be education of a sort – but it wouldn’t be TASIS.

Second, what makes the sense of community so powerful is the personal touch. This really distinguishes the school and always has. We can see this everywhere – in the Advisor program where enduring relationships are fostered; in the in-depth course registration and university counselling, where parents and students receive individual explanations and advice about academic goals and choices; in the extensive, personalised grade report comments that have characterised our academic reporting since the school’s foundation; and in the respect and civility with which people are treated on all levels.

Recently, I heard a discussion between our Admissions Director and the account manager of the new database system that we will be implementing next year. He was surprised to hear that we send – and have always sent – individual acceptance letters to all candidates who are admitted to the school. In all the many independent and international schools he has worked with over the years, he had never come across this before. When asked why we did this, our Admissions Director said, “We try to make the letter personal.” Exactly. That’s what TASIS does. And, as long as TASIS is TASIS, it always will.

The third and final feature is the most difficult to put into words. I know that I could be wrong about this, but I think that TASIS, like other good schools with a sense of identity and tradition, has as its ultimate goal the education of the soul. As evidence, look at the quote from Joseph Addison that is printed every year on the back cover of the TASIS Commencement program. Without education, Addison says, “What is man? A splendid slave, a reasoning savage.” A person could have splendid mountains of material wealth, he could have all the innate reasoning power of a small planet – but without education, he is still a slave and a savage. Why? Because education nourishes that which is the source of freedom and virtue, that which can never be lost regardless of

the circumstances. Something independent of success or popularity or achievement. Something that is yours, alone.

Some might claim that I'm wrong about this because even if Mrs Fleming thought like this, times have changed and so has our understanding. A recent fascinating and well-developed account of modern thinking is found in the *Scientific American* at <http://blogs.scientificamerican.com/brainwaves/2013/12/02/why-life-does-not-really-exist>. The author argues that the real difference between a roller coaster and a cat is just one of complexity. Both are, in effect, machines made of atoms. He concludes his comprehensive discussion like this:

"Life is a concept that we invented. On the most fundamental level, all matter that exists is an arrangement of atoms and their constituent particles. These arrangements fall onto an immense spectrum of complexity, from a single hydrogen atom to something as intricate as a brain. In trying to define life, we have drawn a line at an arbitrary level of complexity and declared that everything above that border is alive and everything below it is not. In truth, this division does not exist outside the mind."

The argument that life is merely a complex arrangement of atoms and particles, which have arranged themselves into various forms through Darwinian evolution (i.e., random mutations over time), has many adherents today. Of course, it does seem odd that anyone should be convinced by an argument that has been produced by a randomly assembled machine, which is how the essay's author apparently views himself. Why should I believe a randomly assembled machine when it uses non-random laws of logic to persuade me? It's not just that it is highly improbable that a process of random chance would ever be able to attain a high enough level of self-awareness to be able to recognise its own random process as such; it's that amidst the process of random chance, this claim to have recognised the underlying random process would be just as random as anything else and so would have no power to persuade. If all men are liars, then nothing is true, not even the statement that all men are liars.

At the same time that I came across the *Scientific American* article, I also discovered, by contrast, a blog by TESIS Foundation Board member David Hicks called "The Emperor's Handbook" (<http://www.emperorshandbook.com>). It consists of translations of and commentaries on Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius's *Meditations* by Mr Hicks and his brother. Marcus Aurelius was aligned to no currently existing religion, yet his words speak over the centuries: "Remember how long you have procrastinated, and how consistently you have failed to put to good use your suspended sentence from the gods. It is about time you realized the nature of the universe (of which you are a part) and of the power that rules it (to which your part owes its existence). Your days are numbered. Use them to throw open the windows of your soul to the sun. If you do not, the sun will soon set, and you with it."

TESIS is not a religious school, and Mrs Fleming certainly never promoted any single religious outlook. But she did stand for personal responsibility, civility, compassion, justice, and truth, qualities that seem at home in Marcus Aurelius's discourse. They are not qualities of mental or physical agility or strength. They are not natural, in the sense of belonging to nature and material reality. They are not measurable. They are not quantities. They have more to do with soul or spirit than mind or body.

I think these three factors – the sense of place, the personal touch, and the education of the soul – add up to something in a school that can, in time, be discerned and appreciated. I'm sure that there are other schools that also have a recognisable spiritual character, though I couldn't say how widespread this is. Schools with a grim or bland campus; where professionals are treated unprofessionally or where efficiency is more important than humanity; that are *soulless* – such schools probably wouldn't rate very highly in the scales of spirit.

If any of this is true, then maybe we should take a break from the Scrooge-like tendency to complain and criticise, and instead indulge ourselves now and then in a sense of joy and gratitude. After all, things could certainly be worse. And anyway, it's Christmas.

---

Adapted from "The Poetics of Learning" blog. Posted December 16, 2013  
<http://acidale.blogspot.ch/2013/12/the-spirit-of-tesis.html>