

The Gist of Arvon

John Moat

Forty years since John Fairfax and I made the move that would lead to the setting up of The Arvon Foundation. From the start it was the idea that knew where it was headed. In fact it often seemed that the idea had simply requisitioned us – we were primed as operatives, but would act reliably only if kept well away from the controls. In truth, I suppose at the outset we *had* had a bit of an idea: that it would be good to create a space where individuals, and in particular young committed writers, could be given a sanctuary away from, as we saw it, the creative deprivation imposed by the system of standard education – and there offered what the pair of us had been gifted, the guidance of experienced writers. But then the idea itself took over and we were left to act like a couple of sorcerer’s apprentices, watching in amazement as the spell constantly came up with the goods. Apparently also it conferred on us a magic agency – we needed only to say the word to a person to find the idea had infected them. And the result of that was/has been/is a national organization with headquarters in London and four regional centres which over the years have employed getting on for 2,000 writers to work with many thousands of individuals eager to explore their own gift for writing.

I’ve often wondered to what extent the thrust behind the adventure came from Fairfax and myself and how much was the determination of the Imagination itself? Most of us use the word Imagination without worrying that we haven’t a clue to what it means. What it means to us, or what it means to anyone. Most often it’s used to relate to an individual’s creativity – to his or her originality (whatever that means!) and inventiveness. To some it is a gift, like the ability to dowse; to some it is more of an aptitude, like being clever; to some it is nothing less than the conveyance of the highest truth. But thinking of it in relation to Arvon I’ve wondered whether it isn’t a formative force, universally inclusive, and which the Player King in Hamlet has a brave shot at describing when he says, “Our thoughts are ours, their ends none of our own.” And that has led me to wonder further how failure to grasp how this formative, determining mystery, properly revered, is the guide and unfolding force in the lives and ventures of every individual, and their society, and above all their education, amounts to a serious ‘missing of the mark’. One that leaves individual and society, to use a phrase currently in use, “unfit for purpose”.

If the concern of the Imagination is universal, how come we individuals can get the impression that its focus is exclusively on us, or even on so small a detail as one of our ventures? Maybe because if we allow the Imagination to become involved, then the venture is informed by universal concern... or *intention*. But how does the Imagination become involved? Is it always to hand, waiting for an opportunity; or is the opportunity something it engineers itself?

I trace the first seed-sprout of Arvon, my part in it at least, back to when I was six. I'd been exposed to poetry, Irish mostly (my mother's doing), and could recite Kipling's *The Cells* and *Gunga Din* (probably my father's doing, he'd been in the Indian Army). I was working on a poem – that's how I remember it--- a serious ballad to commemorate my father being killed in battle in Malaya the year before. If the endeavour was precocious it was as nothing compared to the precociousness of my frustration at being unable to bring it to life. I think now that the frustration was in part at my being unable to realize the intention, but also because I was failing to meet the expectation of my father. What expectation? I had barely known him, but my mother's determination to install me with a manly role model had made of him an idealised character remote, unfeeling and as judgemental as God the Father Almighty. It was to take me half a lifetime to acknowledge that in the flesh he was a man I would have got on with, in fact have – as had so many others – loved very much. But the unfounded expectation went to work on me, and being unfounded it was something I could never conceivably realise. I can see now that it was like being suddenly locked into a form of non-existence – and there the Imagination could no longer reach me. This empty world was regulated from outside by an authoritarian and abstract book of precept – which in due course came fully into its own at two all-male boarding schools – and in this world I was subject to the same unfounded expectations which conditioned me to accepting I would be at best an indifferent performer. In truth the Imagination did still occasionally come knocking – but for all this impact of reality I viewed the visits as urgently secret, probably shameful, and at any cost to be hidden from the patriarchal legislature.

Anything familiar about this? Yes, of course. You don't require the loss of a father to have been suddenly expelled from the magical domain where the child is at home – into the cold confinement of standard education. My experience is merely a metaphor for what in our society is experienced by almost all of us – almost anyone who has been to school, or encouraged by ambitious, or just devoted, parents concerned we should succeed in a world of matter and money and matter of fact – in the *real* world.

We marvel at the way children create their own worlds, and seem impelled to make images, drawings, paintings of these realms – their stories, delights, horrors – with effortless, spontaneous, innocent engagement. We may even momentarily register that each creation is authentic, being both universal and unique – and as such a little unschooled testament to the supreme mystery of the Many and the One. But then don't we shrug our shoulders in blank acceptance when overnight the child's spontaneity and engagement is lost, the light gone out, overtaken by the glare of

common day? Except in those few of us whose concordance with the Imagination is in-built, somehow indomitable.

Maybe I was, or could have been, one of these. Maybe the occasions in the ten school-years following that initial withdrawal when, always on my own, the Imagination in full colour would momentarily take me off-guard, were precise ‘trailers’ to what would happen one night when I was fifteen. It was the holidays. I was sleeping in my bedroom at home. I woke, came suddenly awake, in the small hours to find the light on in my room. Startled, I sat up in bed. I looked around. The familiarity of the room was unfamiliar. In a mirror on the wall opposite I caught sight of myself, startled, apparently listening intently. And the light began to die, slowly went out of the room. I’ve wondered what would ever have happened if I’d shrugged my shoulders and gone back to sleep. But that wasn’t to be the way of it. I switched on the light, went down into the silent house, and came back with a sketch-pad and pastels belonging to my stepfather. And then I made a little picture of what I had seen in the mirror. A lad sitting up in bed, his expression startled, attentive, wondering. When I’d finished it occurred to me he’d perhaps heard an intruder in the house. I wrote a title beneath: “Who’s there?” It was twenty-five years before I came alive to that title’s two-level significance – and began to wonder whether the answer to the question were not the boy who nine years before had been left in the dark.

So what was the light? Had the light returned? Or resurfaced? And what did it amount to?

The truth is, it wasn’t a bad picture (I sold it later for ten bob to a member of the Cricket XI who fancied my sister). I took it back to school, and on a day, sure there was no one else around, in a sweat of apprehension, I sneaked to the Art Room. The Art Master, who like so many art teachers, praise be! was known to be a commanding free spirit, was there on his own. A deep breath, and I showed him the painting. He looked at me, and then looked at the painting a few seconds through narrowed eyes, and then looked at me again – this time more of a passing glance as he handed back the picture and walked away. “Can’t think why you don’t do more,” he said.

And that was enough? Enough for the Imagination to work with. The way was open, even if from the outset the operation has always needed to be covert – away from the glare of his certainty (whoever *he* happens to be). In my little book *The Founding of Arvon* I detail how a way, inconceivable before this visitation, unfolded without any recourse to logic until it included my being fetched with Fairfax to hold the door open for Arvon itself. Within three months of leaving school I was, by unlikely appointment, working in France with the painter Edmond Kapp. It was he who first had me admit to, and then encouraged, my need to write. By the end of the year he had introduced me to his old friend David Higham, one of the country’s most eminent literary agents, who read a small book I’d written and invited me to be ‘on his books’. There followed four charmed years at Oxford (details of how I came to be

admitted is something the Authorities to this day would probably choose to suppress) with Nevill Coghill and Jonathan Wordsworth for tutors, and ending with a respectable but totally unwarranted degree. Then came an attempt at full time writing which I only narrowly survived, but which led to my undertaking a form of apprenticeship with the South African poet, John Howland Beaumont. Then to the collision with Fairfax in the pub; to Antoinette who introduced a little sanity; to a novel published... and thence to Arvon.

If I'm suggesting that Arvon wouldn't have come into being but for the experience with the light in my bedroom, and that the experience and the unfolding of it that followed were related to the Imagination, I've come close to claiming that the Imagination carries an *intention*. Then I'd better own what this would seem to infer – that whatever mystery the Imagination amounts to, the field of its operation reaches beyond the individual creativity we usually connect it with. Reaches beyond it, and is *wholly* concerned with it. It has the capacity to relate the individual to the universal, and would seem *intent* on enabling the individual by expressing him or herself to realise that the unique story they have to tell is essential to the completion of the all-inclusive story of the universe. So here is the bottom line: there is an existential onus on each individual “to know thyself”, to tell his or her own story (and this in no way relates exclusively to writing, nor just to the fine arts, but to the story as told by the self-expressive act or utterance or enactment of *every* individual); the full of this can be achieved only through recourse to the Imagination; to provide guidance and opportunity for this to happen must, one would have thought, be the primary concern of genuine education. And what my own experience brought home to me was that where the mystery with its *intention* (which here is focused on the self-realisation or fulfillment of the individual) is overridden by some extraneous intention, the individual is cut off from the Imagination – and the story, his or her story, is suspended. This means that any situation (which includes every *human* situation) whose health is dependent on the realized potential of the individuals involved, must be compromised by a system that marginalizes the immanent reality of the Imagination. To call such a system *educational* is, to say the least, a misnomer.

This morning I hear on the radio a Government Minister for Education say that it is the responsibility of the System to ensure that every child achieve his or her potential. That sounds fine... until overtaken by the chilling thought, “And by whose criteria will this potential be defined? Or processed? Or evaluated?” After all an individual's potential that relates to their ability to contribute on behalf of society to rising living standards, wider consumer choice, survival in the cut-throat global economy may not be the same as that which realized would contribute to the City culture William Blake had in mind for England's green and pleasant land! The capacity to be open and responsive to the Imagination is every child's, every individual's most precious gift. When that gift is realized, i.e. when the individual has thus uniquely expressed him or herself, then this is the unique gift that each has to offer. Surely then it is the gift that Society, and if not Society then you and I, should do most to protect.

If this were true maybe we should be wondering what is the outlook for a society that regards the Imagination as a handy aptitude of a minority of its population – one that can be schooled and harnessed to productive citizenship, and employed to maximize GNP. It wouldn't be a big surprise to learn that the government of such a society was focusing its support for the arts on something called The Arts as Industry. The educational system of this society would serve its priorities – in order to hone the population to maximum production it must impose standard grades, abstract targets, and its own full-time prescribed curriculum. Individual self-expression, and teachers with experience and time to guide their students, would be surplus to necessity.

Control – attribute of the rational mind and the male disposition: precisely the force that dominates the government of virtually every nation. Behind the need to control is the fear of being out of control, and of forces 'beyond our control'. Hence the tendency for control endlessly to modify itself in a drive for total control. And there's nothing so powers the drive as the constant dark presentiment that the better half of life is beyond control. Feeling for instance, which the rational mind dismisses as the register of the unreliable feminine (but which it will have to learn to embrace if it is ever to achieve balance) – and the uncontrollable one who communicates almost exclusively through feeling, i.e. the Imagination. At the back of the class, probably hugging the radiator and reading a novel, there'll always be one or two who don't do dates and sums, and are by constitution unresponsive to their schooling. Fairfax and I for instance. So when our paths, or a covert *intention*, landed us under the guidance of poets who had learned their trade in a different school, we were readily 'radicalised'. It was what we took from these teachers that we drew on when finally we were requisitioned by the idea of Arvon. Lets say, four things.

First, we'd now experienced how with any art or craft it is only the living and practice of it that provides the authority that can offer someone else genuine guidance. Those who live the practice then carry the experience with them, and become its embodiment, a part of their presence – which is why a mere encounter can be a form of guidance. My first meeting with Edmond Kapp, which was also my first encounter with a wholly dedicated artist, lasted no more than forty minutes, and yet by the end I knew I had undergone radical alteration. Not only had a door with my name on it been opened, but I was through it – I hadn't a clue where I'd fetched up, but knew there was no going back. Later an encounter with John Howland Beaumont provided more specific guidance – he was a writer and poet. Fairfax had had a similar experience with his uncle, the poet George Barker. Which is why we needed no discussion – the only people we would ask to be tutors must be experienced imaginative writers.

Second was having it demonstrated that the Imagination is, or is part of, an unguarded generosity. Any endeavour sanctioned by the Imagination will, if true to itself, be proof of this in heart, word and deed. Not by the requisite mission statement printed under your logo, but in spirit pervasive as oxygen in the bloodstream. And so unavoidably *inclusive*. Our mentors, by being fully available and committed to guiding

us in our attempts to make of ourselves a way for the Imagination, put this generosity on the line – though they made the proviso quite clear that this was on the understanding that their commitment was chiefly to the Imagination itself, and would extend to us for so long as our own commitment and willing to practise the craft matched their own. Important this, because it should be stressed that no one hereabouts is offering the easy or otiose option, or that genuine education will not involve hard work, discipline and work in mastering relevant skills.

This then was the role we suggested to those we asked to tutor. None needed instruction. They were attracted to the situation we were offering them, and even though the fee was very small were eager to take part; and I now feel that an eagerness to teach, or act mentor, is most often an attribute of realized imaginative authority – and that this authority extends in individual style to the ability to offer guidance. Each in his or her own way gave themselves to the venture. With the exception of the very few who over the years have missed the mark and come to teach at Arvon out of regard for themselves, tutors (that's getting on for two thousand of them) have been giving ever since.

If it's true that generosity is a feature of the creative Imagination, it would seem obvious why the prevailing System of Education should generally ignore it: the System doesn't do business with generosity. In fact quite the opposite – it is openly extortionate. Teachers for the most are, or would be, generous – but not the System. If it gives, it gives only on condition that it will be repaid, and with interest. It provides for and rewards not in relation to individual potential, but in so far as the individual meets its demands. And to earn even this small favour he or she is made to compete... cut-throat competition with their brothers, sisters, friends and every other candidate for a place on the ladder to... to material success. A sound, pragmatic policy this for a nation involved in cut-throat competition with fellow nations for survival in the global marketplace. The System is thorough, systematically exclusive and as draconian as the celebrated bed of Procrustes... except if you fail the test, you won't be cut down to size – you'll simply be excluded.

The Imagination on the other hand runs an 'open door' policy and is universally inclusive, and the wealth it promises is fulfillment. From the outset Arvon's tutors have been the surety, or is it the medium? of this generosity. And Arvon's enduring success is because the generosity has somehow embraced everyone who has contributed to the Arvon adventure: Council Members, Staff, Friends and above all, in their openness and eagerness, those who come on the courses.

Third, that the Imagination, whether it visits us in the thunder or in the still, small voice, commands an undivided attention; is most likely to engage with us when, even in company, we are alone. To paraphrase St Paul, we can be taught to speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but to speak with our own voice, to avoid becoming another member of the tinkling cymbal section of our primary, secondary, university education, we must at some point find ourselves unimpededly open to, and one to

One with, the emptiness that is the storeroom of the Imagination. Fairfax and I felt that to provide opportunity for some such encounter should be integral to an Arvon course – which is why we suggested that the second day in the four-day course should give students the chance to be alone, while providing support and a safe place for what many come from a world of habitual busy-ness might find a quite daunting adventure.

No such provision of course in the current crammed curricula of teachers, teacher-trainees or students. But it's worth recalling that at the outset of Arvon teacher-training colleges included in their programmes an Activities Week during which students could explore some creative discipline outside their syllabus. Sometimes this gap in the curriculum would achieve the opening we planned for with Day 2 of an Arvon course. The success of the courses Arvon ran for teacher-trainees was key to its early survival – but it also extended our understanding of Arvon's potential. The quality of the work produced, and which in many cases the trainees continued to produce, remains haunting evidence of the untapped store of talent among today's teachers. It almost certainly also suggests why there are so many teachers unfulfilled and demoralized when their workload and the bureaucratic demands leave them no opportunity for creative contact with the Imagination. We have to realise that the System of Education fails society when it denies teachers such experience that would not only enrich their lives, but afford them authority to nurture the imaginative life of their students. This failure devalues the vocation of the teacher – and in direct contradiction of the Government's aims is compromising the creative potential of the country.

Fourth, and hardest to get word to, is an essence that work with those experienced writers brought home to us. Maybe the word is one not much in fashion, reverence. Reverence for what quantum scientists might call the *intentionality* of the venture. Robert Frost in his poem *Two Tramps in Mudtime* comes as close to expressing this *intentionality* as is ever likely to be possible in a single statement:

Only where love and need are one,
And work is play for mortal stakes
Is the deed ever really done
For Heaven and the future's sakes.

Here, for me at least, are implied the qualities that render radical the approach to education that Arvon identifies with: Inclusiveness, Rigour, Light-heartedness. Oh, and Sincerity. The four, in sum, amount to reverence.

The word sincerity is used by Zen Buddhists to describe the spirit of good practice. Shunryu Suzuki in his fine introduction to meditation, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, writes, "You should get rid of excessive things – if your practice is good, without being aware of it you will become proud of your practice. That pride is extra. What you do is good, but something more is added to it. You should get rid of that something that is extra. This point is very, very important, but usually we are not subtle enough to realise it, and we go in the wrong direction." Self-expressive work, informed

by the Imagination, is, *in the making*, an end in itself. In the making there can be no secondary concerns, nothing *in order that* – and for an initiative that exists to fortify the imaginative self-expression of individuals this means that concern with the achievement of recognition, success in the market, enhanced academic performance, increased self-confidence (all of which Arvon could justifiably point to) are *something extra*. At best they are secondary, or merely incidental. And yet often because these are measurable results they impress potential funders – and then to feature them can become a temptation. But were they ever to become the primary concern, the *something extra* would have taken over. Arvon would have lost its way – or at least lost touch with its origin.

So too has a society that views the Imagination as utilitarian, i.e. as useful only when concerned with *something extra*, lost its way. Why, you might expect such a society to be one that viewed Nature as a resource to be exploited, or the Arts as a process of profitable industry, or education as the efficient supply line of productive citizens. It would be a society that for its convenience had alienated itself from its essential livelihood, and turned its back on the creative potential of its humanity. In which case Arvon's little adventure (and there are many out there not unlike it) would be as that of the tumbler W. B. Yeats told of, who laid out his mat in the path of the advancing army – simply witness to what might be otherwise.

Ask for a quote that speaks of the Imagination and most often you'll be referred to Shakespeare's,

And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

What on earth do we take that to mean? What on earth does the Minister of Education take it to mean? And yet everyone who has ever been fingered by the Imagination must have felt in their marrow they are included in something that goes beyond them, that they have been able to offer a local habitation and give a name to it, and so be part of some mysterious *intentionality*. When the painter whose studio Don Quixote visits is asked what he is painting and he replies, "That is as it may turn out to be"; or when recently Anthony Gormley says that Art is an individual observing his or her own experience; or when fifty-five years ago the boy, after the strange light has withdrawn from his bedroom, goes down into the dark house in search of a sketchbook; or when the lad just returned from the first Arvon course writes, "We had been called upon to write as if writing mattered... I think what was shattering was that suddenly everything mattered"... each is alive to what is *bodying forth*.

Alpha, the beginning. Here is the *intention*: to arrive at the beginning and to know the place for the first time. Omega, the ultimate coming home. Alpha and Omega – the beginning and the end of the Story.

The scintilla of enlightenment that illuminates every imaginative act or presentiment or work of art – every realized moment of imaginative self-expression, yields a clearer view of home.

Arvon has always thought of its Centres as both writing houses and homes. At the outset we told tutors to think of the Centre as their home, which *they* had opened to their students, and so it was *homely* for the students to be part of the cooking and the skills in running the home. Arvon still insists on the importance of this, on keeping away from any feel of an institution – and accepts that making home is appropriate provision and metaphor for an imaginative enterprise.

People, time and again, say that their experience of coming to Arvon is like being allowed home.

John Fairfax, who last year died at home in his Thatched Cottage, wrote in a poem, “To grow a man must love his home.”

“Only where love and need...” Love... What’s love got to do with it? What’s love got to do with the Imagination? Ask William Blake: “Eternity is in love with the productions of time.” Ask Henri Matisse: “But is not love the origin of all creation?”

In the end the only context one has to work with is oneself. So the mystery of the Imagination is apparent to me only in what I take to be those mysterious synchronicities and appointments that have shaped and *directed* my experience – until now, as I grow old and mystery seems somehow more immediate, I find a quickening sense not only of my life being something imagined, but as being individually party to *the* Imagining; and – just as everyone else’s unique life is – essential to its completeness. To what end? I don’t know, but will make do with Omega – perhaps even settle for Teilhard de Chardin’s *Omega Point* which is, if I understand him, the universal realization of Love.

That then’s the gist of it; of why Arvon values and seeks to nourish individual Imagination. That, for as long as it exists and is in touch with its own beginnings, is the gist of Arvon.

© John Moat, 2011