

overheard at the extra-curricula café

The improvement myth

Cappuccino: Well, I must say that you are looking more relaxed than usual.

Latté: That's not surprising since it's the middle of the holidays.

Cappuccino: How did the end of term go?

Latté: Oh, the usual student farewells. Tears, hugs and handshakes. And, as usual, a few staff leaving too.

Cappuccino: Including your nemesis, the redoubtable Mrs Bennett, head of history.

Latté: Yes, indeed. 'The one thing we learn from history is that we don't learn from history'.

Cappuccino: What's she going to do? Guide folk around National Trust properties?

Latté: Oh no! She's off to invest her lump sum by opening an English tea room in the Algarve. Fulfilling a life-long ambition.

Cappuccino: You'll have to visit her. Ask if there's a staff discount.

Latté: And I must brush up on my Portuguese.

Cappuccino: Have you appointed a replacement?

Latté: Oh, yes. A very different character. No more Mrs Bennett bursting into my room in a theatrical rage. I will sleep more quietly at night.

Cappuccino: So, that's definitely a school improvement?

Latté: Ah, that mythical concept of the early twenty-first century.

Cappuccino: Mythical concept? It's how many of us earn our living. How can it be mythical?

Latté: Because schools cannot improve. It's people who improve. And when people like Mrs Bennett leave for the Algarve, a lifetime of experience and wisdom leaves with her. And then someone else comes along and has to learn all the same things. The newcomers are destined to make the same mistakes all over again. It's the same truth that keeps all us schoolteachers in business. It's also an argument against the theory of evolution. If evolution were true, we'd all be getting PhDs by now. School improvement is a myth. A nice idea, but a myth nonetheless.

Cappuccino: You paint a rather dystopian picture of the future.

Latté: Ah, that is why we have to teach our students *why* they need to learn, and *how* to learn.

Cappuccino: Yes, I agree, but of course there is a real problem with that.

Latté: Is there? What's that?

Cappuccino: The answer to the question *why* will differ according to your worldview. It all depends on whom or what you worship.

Latté: Secularists say they don't worship anything.

Cappuccino: Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will come out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behoves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming." Rather perceptive, don't you think?

Latté: Yes. And that's the unique advantage of Christians working in schools. They know whom they worship. They should know what they are about and they should get on with it.

Cappuccino: As far as they can within the tangled web which is called a legislative framework.

Latté: That's another myth. Christians in education should be confident in their beliefs and just get on with being good and conscientious teachers.

Cappuccino: Yes, but they need training, just like anyone else. You'll find that in Deuteronomy 11.18-21

Latté: You would say that. I've spent a shed-load of money on training for my staff, and I am afraid that some of it has had opposite outcomes to those intended.

Cappuccino: I read a notice on display in a training department once: "If you think training is expensive, try ignorance".

Latté: Education will always be expensive because it can only be done with teachers, even in this age of digital technology. It's labour intensive and always will be, because it's fundamentally relational.

Cappuccino: That's what makes it the best and probably the most important job in the world.

Latté: That reminds me. I went into a supermarket in early August and looked through the reduced section.

Cappuccino: As you always do.

Latté: Yes. And I found a load of stuff for pupils and their parents to give to their teachers at the end of term.

Cappuccino: Like what?

Latté: Mugs, ties, desk tidies, stationery, badges even.

Cappuccino: Badges?

Latté: Yes. I bought one as it was only fifty pence. It said "World's greatest teacher". And not only was there an apostrophe, but it was in the right place!

Cappuccino: A badge. For yourself?

Latté: Of course not!

Cappuccino: Then for whom?

Latté: I would have thought that was obvious. Jesus, of course. I've put it on my notice board for now, though.

Cappuccino: Don't forget to take it with you when you leave.

Latté: When I leave?

Cappuccino: Yes, on that day.

Latté: What day?

Cappuccino: On that day when, "the skies will thrill with rapture, And myriad, myriad human voices sing, And earth to heaven, and heaven to earth, will answer: At last the Saviour, Saviour of the world, is King."

Latté: Ah, yes. Meanwhile I'd better get on with preparation for the new term. I have to inspire my staff, young and old. We have a training day on the first day of term.

Cappuccino: What are you going to tell them?

Latté: I'm just going to tell them that they are a great crowd of people making a real difference in the lives of young people, and to go on doing that life-changing work. And ...

Cappuccino: And what?

Latté: I'm going to take in a large tray of cream cakes, and for the weight-obsessed, a basket of fruit.

Cappuccino: Well, in that case, especially as Mrs Bennett is safely overseas, I might join you! ■

