

## Peter Johnson's Speech at the 2008 CRA Dinner

Why are we all here? On one level, it's an existential question. An ontological thing. A Being question, if you like. On a different level, it's easy. It's simply what I do. I like dinners. I like my friends. I do both here.

Yet that's not a logical answer, I think. It's irrational. Reason says that I left Christ's College thirty five years ago. Reason says that just one sixth of that elapsed time spent "doing the CCF" at school is but foreplay compared to the 35 years of experiences since then. Reason says that I only see you friends once a year, at best. So, what's the reason for our being here? I think there are two, and one is very much more powerful than the other. It's a thought I'd like to share with you and, if it resonates in your minds as it has in mine, then I'll feel I've earned my supper. If not, well, tell me I'm a boring old fart in a suit. Later.

For every one of us there are two aspects of our existence that govern what we are. They are doing and being. I do and I am. They are like two angels sitting, one on each of our shoulders. These two angels represent the reasons I am here, and possibly why you are humouring me by listening.

I'm sure we all of us here derive huge enjoyment from the doing. Not just doing dinners of well-cooked food - and delicious wine that makes one fall over. Doing sport. Doing outings with our families. Doing travel. Doing relationships - I hesitate to bring sex into every conversation, but doing sex as well. As the man said when asked to give a speech on the joy of sex, "It gives me great pleasure..." and promptly sat down, he'd said it all. It's true, though. Doing things is enjoyable. Doing the CCF was enjoyable, I remember, and that is part of the reason we are here. Some things we did then, and here I address the older members, those who are no longer cadets, some things are still enjoyable to do. Some are things we can still get a kick out of doing, like for me it's canoeing (remember arduous - adventurous - training?) Sometimes I simply remember that I could - once - do things well, like assault courses. Well, I could do them well, once. Sometimes I remember that I'm getting bad at remembering, and I know that I had a good time spent doing something, but I cannot quite remember what it was.

What I *can* remember is that the Corps gave me a steer towards a most enjoyable twenty-odd years of doing in the Army. I thank you for that. I thank you for instilling the spark of adventure that encouraged me to get out and do things. Doing. One angel. On one shoulder. One reason to be here.

Thus, probably thanks to the Corps, I am a soldier (honest, I am still a soldier, officially, for another 18 months...) Which brings me to being. I am a soldier. Not I do but I am. Doing and being, remember, the twin angels, sitting one on each of your two shoulders. Actually, some people think they are doing people. Others are convinced they are being people...lots of those in the Church, but that's another story. It's a question: are we what we do *or* are we what we are? Do or be? Now, I subscribe to the Sinatra doctrine that says it is not an either one-or-the-other question, but both...and: he memorably said

many times that we are *both* doing *and* being...dooby, dooby... dooby do, he said.

Being, then... That is, "I am" rather than "I do". It's where I'd like to take you now.

I am a teacher. Can't blame that on the Corps - can I?? Yet teaching is in the headlines. We read that a report, supported by the Prime Minister, no less, recommends expanding the CCF in schools. Once widespread, CCF is now offered at only a couple of hundred particularly traditional private schools, as well as only a few dozen state schools (I thought it was more, but it's not – just a few dozen). And one of those is our Corps, at Christ's College. That makes us particularly strongly placed to comment. Now, teachers are not the only people to have attacked the armed services recently - the unpopularity of the Iraq war has created an environment in which having a go at them seems widely regarded as fair game. But, somehow, things military are not that popular among teachers. Many are already angry about teaching material published by the MoD which they see as glamorous propaganda. Some teachers suspect that expanding the CCF is merely the latest ploy to militarise their classrooms. Although the MoD denies that it is a recruiting tool, the CCF certainly serves as an ante-chamber to the armed forces: many British soldiers, like me, were cadets in their youth. Yet, even in Britain, where traditionalists fume that it is far too hard to kick poorly behaved children out of school, ... even in Britain playing with guns is usually grounds for expulsion. But, if the government gets its way, then gunplay could soon be encouraged in state schools.

Are we about to become more popular, I wonder? Will we be seen as the new paradigm? Hardly. But, news like this set me thinking about how what the Corps does touches what I am, and how it has touched plenty like me: we who are represented round these tables – how has the Corps touched our being?

I trained for three years as a priest before I became a teacher instead. So forgive me if I use a bit of theology. It's the being rather than the doing bit again... I am a person who thinks in spiritual terms. The Christian message is of peace and forgiveness, but the religious imagery that goes with it owes much more to the experience of warfare than it does to Easter bunnies. "True peace is the fruit of sacrifice" (that's a quote); "the victory flag of Christ is attached to a cross." (that's another quote). Easter hymns declare that "the strife is o'er the battle done"; "thine be the glory, risen, conquering Son". This language resonates because spiritual life has real parallels with military life. Courage, discipline, loyalty and trust are needed for both. There is glamour in military things of course, in the uniforms, the bands, the parades. But the point of these things is not to glorify war but to inspire individuals to transcend self-interest. To inspire individuals to transcend self-interest. At its most basic military training teaches you to look out for your friends as much as for yourself, perhaps more. Prince Harry, interviewed in Afghanistan, was quite candid about how army life had helped him grow up. Of course it can all go horribly wrong; loyalty can become corrupt, discipline can become bullying,

but at least there is an *attempt* to live virtuously - not for pious reasons but because it really works for people.

Spiritual growth, like military life, involves warfare on the ego;

the cowardly, defended ego that blames others but will not confront itself;

the selfish, deceitful ego that saves itself at others expense;

the vain ego which parades itself as a victim while milking others for all they will give.

Military life is one of the few places where such commonplace selfishness is exposed and challenged. And that's something wider society needs. Angela Tilby, speaking on "Thought for the Day" said it would be good to hear more from teachers about how they propose to train young people to put others first and rise above self interest. I invite you to look around you here. This is how, I reply. This is how we influence what people *are*, their being – for the better. Cadets do all these things – they "do the Corps" in order to become people - to be people - who are just enough grown-up to be able to master their ego. Now *there's* a reason for celebrating the Corps.

And that is why I am here. To celebrate what the Corps does, and what cadets become in their being.