

## Integration

I once encountered a student who longed to go to mainstream school. Leo knew almost every fact in his science book but he had only ever been to special schools because of his autism. It is not too difficult to imagine how frustrating his life must have been. His tantrums were awesome.

‘How would you like to study one subject at a nearby high school?’ I asked. ‘Maybe Science.’

Leo looked up at me incredulously. ‘Could I?’

‘You’d have to catch the train.’ I waited for the tantrum; but none came. The goal of getting to school was enough to overcome even his fear of trains.

‘We’ll make some phone calls, then.’

Many people with autistic spectrum disorder are hypersensitive to auditory or tactile stimulation. For Leo, the slightest crinkle in his sock manifested itself as a huge pebble. We would wait patiently for him to undo his laces, remove the stones that had “materialised” in his shoes and retie the laces. Getting to the train usually meant a number of stopping, untying, emptying, retying rituals.

The high school nominated a teacher and we went to visit.

‘We’re in the middle of a unit on human physiology’, the teacher explained. ‘What do you know about the bones in the body?’

A flood of information poured forth from Leo at a rapid rate. The teacher smiled wryly. This all made for an interesting change from average students with average memories. Then we went to the classroom to see where he would sit.

Three weeks after he began at high school he topped the class in the unit test. Later in the year he received a prize for Science at Awards Night.

In facing his overwhelming fear, he is one of the bravest students I have ever worked with. His life didn’t suddenly become easy, but it did change dramatically and new futures became possible.

## Degrees apart

Things are pretty quiet this afternoon and I have only two students. Ella is multi-talented and will probably study veterinary science. Stan, who is struggling to read, would make a good store man. He looks very strong.

‘What’s absolute zero?’ Ella asks, looking up from her assignment.

‘Minus 273 degrees Celsius.’

Stan looks puzzled. ‘What’s this word?’

‘Haven’t. It means have not. When they leave out a letter they put in this apostrophe.’

Within the space of a minute I have responded to two radically different cross curricula enquiries from two most disparate students. Somehow this ludicrous juxtaposition seems to sum up the range of clientele I encounter in this work. It is little wonder I am rarely bored.

## The upside down map

My favourite wall chart is a laminated map of the world, with south at the top. I like to look at things from another angle, a different perspective.

The map is amusing to some, but disconcerting to others. One student railed and insisted that it was wrong, wrong, wrong. He swung the chart around.

‘There!’ he exclaimed. ‘Now it’s right.’

I gave him a grin. ‘It’s lucky I can read upside down.’

## Micha the map maker

Two young Israeli peace activists are visiting the Quaker Meeting House at Kelvin Grove. It always gives me hope when young people enter into the social justice network and give their time and talents to making the world a kinder place.

While the Zionist government of Israel is busy building “facts on the ground”, people like Misha are producing maps. Interestingly, the “facts on the maps” bear little resemblance to the Zionist position of terra nullius; a concept readily recognisable to us in Australia. Indeed the official tourist map depicts East Jerusalem in blocks of green and grey: there are no streets shown; the Arab population just does not exist.

Only a hundred or so years ago, under the Ottoman Empire, Jerusalem was a truly international city where Jews, Muslims and Christians walked the streets and followed their respective cultures. Today the Zionists want this ancient city as their capital, but history dictates that it belongs to all the inheritors of the Abrahamic tradition.

The militaristic culture of Zionist Israel suffuses the government, where many politicians have held military rank. Thus they look to military-type solutions. Sahar, the young peace activist accompanying Micha, is based in Ramallah. This old village is now a northern suburb of the greatly expanded city of Jerusalem. Quakers have been in Ramallah for more than 150 years and there has been a Quaker Meeting House for more than 100 years. Sahar claims an ancestry that goes back to David. I am amazed and grateful that she feels confident enough in her own skin to dedicate herself to lessening the violence. As she travels the world, she opens conversations offering alternative stories that contrast with the dominant narrative.

It is our task to stand steadfastly alongside those Jewish people who find the courage to speak out beyond tribal loyalties.

## Seeking the Oneness

From an early age, the notions of tribalism and “otherness” provided much food for thought. In the village of Cloyna there was a Methodist church, but we were Church of England. Our congregation gathered in the nearby Windera Hall until a church was built. Strict Methodists did not go to dances or wear lipstick. Catholics had to go all the way into the town of Murgon to attend Mass before having their Sunday breakfast. They were also expected to abstain from eating meat every Friday; whereas we observed this only on Good Friday. Marrying outside the congregations was discouraged.

In the town of Murgon, further segregation was visible to all. The gates to the public toilets in Lamb Street carried a sign directing “Natives” to the toilets in Gore Street and this policy was overseen by an attendant. It was a momentous day when the signage was removed. At primary school, I encountered only one young First Nations girl whose father was stationed temporarily in the area to maintain the railway tracks.

By the time I went to high school, there were Catholics and First Nations students attending the State system. When I heard that the various pastors and ministers in the town had formed a Ministers Fraternal, I felt even more certain that the artificial boundaries that had dominated the social structures were destined to continue to crumble.

My introduction to the Islamic world was through Arabian folk tales and articles in the *Australian Women's Weekly* about the Shah of Persia and his stunningly beautiful wife when I was about ten. However it was not until I read Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* that I felt a synergy with this tradition.

A Maronite Christian by birth, Gibran revisioned Jesus of Nazareth in the light of Islamic Sufi mysticism as an ever-living presence in the human heart, present to people of all religious traditions and of none. Not since the *Arabian Nights* had a writer of Arab descent enjoyed such universal appeal and *The Prophet* went on to outsell all others in the twentieth century except the Bible. His experimentation in prose

allowed him to perfect the prose poem as a new genre.

Gibran's desire to reconcile Christianity and Islam was both instinctive and practical, according to Suheil Bushrui and Joe Jenkins in their 1998 biography, *Kahlil Gibran: Man and Poet*. He foresaw the dangers of sectarianism in Lebanon, as well as 'insidious Western interventionist policies that such divisions would invite'.

Revisioning and reconciling is necessary in promoting peace. It is also deeply reassuring in the quest for a more coherent grasp of the Oneness. The writer George Eliot, in her translation of the German theologian Feuerbach, agrees with his analysis of Judaeo-Christian authority as 'pernicious in many respects, not least on the question of egotistical exclusiveness'. The rejection of dogma in the Quaker tradition invites a Universalist inclusivity to grow and creates space for a peace church to blossom.