



A case for religion?

BY LISA LINTERN

I'm going to get shot down for this post. I know I will. I'll probably be branded a hypocrite, naïve, or some kind of Holy Joe lunatic. Or I might dramatically change my mind in few months time. Either way, I have to write this if I am to remain true to myself. This is what's going on in my head...

I've had a pretty big change of heart about something lately. Something I once felt very strongly against. As strongly as Tracey Spicer did in her article 'Get God Out of Our Schools' on The Hoopla here.

deep breath here goes...

If you asked me 12 months ago what I thought about religion in schools I would have delivered a carbon copy of Tracey's argument (although, I doubt as eloquently – I adore Tracey's pieces in The Hoopla). But when I read her article last week, and the comments it attracted, I didn't find myself nodding enthusiastically as I usually do. Instead, I sat back in my chair for a little navel gazing.

My five-year son (who I regularly refer to as Boy-Who-Asks-Questions on this blog, and the reason for this will now become clear) started school this year, in a Catholic school. As someone who has never practiced religion in her life, I never thought any child of mine would ever go to a Catholic school.

The decision to send my son wasn't a straightforward one. It came about when he showed early signs of 'giftedness'. Apart from an eye-opening memory and a vocabulary that could put his own parents to shame, he also displayed the frustration that can accompany hungry little minds.

Our pre-school director suggested we have him assessed. We did, but we weren't motivated to measure his intellect. Rather, we were keen to gain a clear picture of what we needed to do to support him socially, especially during those first crucial years at school.

As part of this assessment, the psychologists gave us a list of schools that they felt would suit him - public, private and of various denominations. While they had no real issue with our local primary school, they balked at its size and felt he would thrive more in a smaller school. On their list was our local Catholic school; the entire school is the size of the local primary school's kinder year alone. I had already heard good things about it, but hadn't seriously considered sending him there, until now.

It was with trepidation that I organized an interview with the school's Principal. Given my husband is Catholic (and Irish... brownie points) I told him that I would leave the talking to

him. At the interview my husband was his usual charming Irish self. I, however, sat quietly, occasionally glancing side-ways at the crucifix on the wall.

"And Lisa, what do you hope your son gets from the Catholic school system?" the Principal asked me, causing me to sit up in my seat.

"To be happy. Oh, and to have an open mind and tolerance to others," was my response.

"Well, I'd say we've no chance there," my husband sighed later, as we left through the school gates.

But it seems my answer was the one she wanted to hear. When we received the letter offering Boy-Who-Asks-Questions a place at the school, we were both quite surprised. While I was encouraged by the school's size and supportive reputation, I was still having doubts about the religious element. My husband shrugged off my doubts: "I survived, so will he."

About a month before he was due to start, the school held an information night. I nearly fell off my chair when the Principal asked us to start the night with a prayer. But, the prayer turned out to be a video celebrating the unique qualities of children and the importance of allowing them to be themselves. I relaxed. Heck, I even teared up a little. No fire and brimstone yet...

Then Boy-Who-Asks-Questions first day arrived. And now one month later, the delight I see on his face when I collect him every afternoon, as he waves his new friends goodbye, is the only reassurance I need.

Yes, the religious 'thing' has come up in our after school chats. Like the time we were covering his workbooks, and when we came to his religion book he explained to me that sometimes it's good to pray. Praying, he explained to me, was kind of like sending a message from your heart to heaven.

"Oh mum! That means I can send Flopsy a message!" he suddenly realised.

Our pet rabbit's death a year ago opened up a deep well of questions from Boy-Who-Asks-Questions. As a young child he struggled to understand the finality of life. As a parent, I struggled to explain it to him. After Flopsy died, he worried about dying much more than a four-year-old should. One morning it even prompted him to look up from his cereal and ask: "Mum, why do we live?"



And this is the thing I'm realizing here people.

Is it really better to tell my kids that when you cark it you end up as worm food? That thought terrorizes me, so it's the last message I'd ever want to give them. While I don't know what the answer is, I've always lived in hope that those strong emotions we feel in our heart every day, don't just suddenly stop.

I know, many people will counter me by reminding me the ease of which religion can be, and has been, manipulated with horrific outcomes. And then there is the issue of the Catholic Church's refusal to accept homosexuality, not to mention same-sex marriage, which personally drives me mad.

But so far, I have seen no evidence of this at my son's school, or at the family masses we've attended with him. And believe me, the moment I do, I will act. But for now, all I've heard is how important it is to be inclusive and respectful to one another. Literally. My son came home one afternoon and drilled me on the exact meaning of 'include' because "that's what we should always do Mum, include everyone, especially when we play together."

So why am I telling you this? Back to Tracey's piece, which I know focused on compulsive religious instruction in State schools. And I get this issue, I really do. But when I read some of the comments at the end of Tracey's piece, I felt almost apologetic that I was somebody who has made the decision to send my son to a religious school.

It's not easy to swim against the tide of liberal thinking; it's something I'm not used to doing very often. Perhaps I also wanted to share my story as an 'outsider looking in' – hopefully a precautionary tale against applying stereotypes to the things we don't truly understand.