I recently travelled to the North-West of Ireland, in order to attend two events held in Derry/Londonderry, a picturesque 6th century city much like Newcastle. Derry has been variously described as “a city emerging from its long and colourful history to showcase its brilliance to the world” and “a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis of conflict”. It is no secret that Derry’s bloody history still affects the communities that reside within this walled city, with events such as ‘Sunday Bloody Sunday’, that until recently remained so wrongly publicised, taking place in its modern history. With this in mind, it seems only fitting that an event of this calibre take place in Derry, the UK’s City of Culture 2013.

Upon arrival at Derry’s City Hotel, after a long and very beautiful bus ride from Belfast, we were greeted with the immensely colourful sight of a dozen or so Tibetan monks, who were waiting in the lobby for two exceedingly special guests. Richard Moore, a man who lost his sight after being shot between the eyes with a rubber bullet at the age of 10 and then found and forgave the British soldier, Charles Innes, who was responsible. To this day Richard and Charles remain close friends. The second and probably the more anticipated of the two was His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama who I had the great pleasure and honour of meeting on two occasions during my visit.

I have never heard an excuse so humbling as the one given by the Dalai Lama when arriving over an hour late at the Educating the Heart event held in St. Josephs’ Boys School. The Dalai Lama had been meeting Richard’s siblings, and was devastated when told that Richard’s mother was unwell and consequently
unable to meet with him at the City Hotel. On hearing this, the Dalai Lama insisted that he must at once be taken to her house, which to the horror of both his entourage and the police they proceeded to do. The Dalai Lama described this as, “meeting my hero and best friend’s mother”. When later leaving her house, he noticed a lady waving through her window at the mass of black limousines. He then sprang into action, jumping out of the car and running back down the street in order to embrace “my hero’s mother’s neighbour”.

The Educating the Heart event was held in a small room at St Joseph’s School, with around 50 invited guests from diverse backgrounds. St Joseph’s was Richard’s secondary school and he regularly cites his good education (along with his family and his community) as one of the key factors that helped him come to terms with his blindness. I was one of the few students that attended this private event, with most of the other guests being members of examination boards, curriculum boards, education ministers, school principals and teachers.

The purpose of this event was to discuss the possibility of distilling secular ethics in children from as young as five years old. There were several speakers at this event, including professors from Emory University, in Atlanta, Georgia. “Secular ethics” are often referred to using different names, such as basic human values or global/universal ethics. This is due to a perceived “taboo” around the word “secular” as it is often thought that this diminishes the value of religion. As the Dalai Lama himself explained to us, he uses the word “secular” with its Indian meaning which essentially translates to “all inclusive”, covering all religions as well as those whose who have no religious beliefs.

“Basic human values” are, in short, just that – basic human values - however they go further and bring in the concepts of compassion, interconnectivity, empathy and forgiveness. Another way of describing basic human values might be our common ground, the in-built features which we all share.

The Dalai Lama considers an understanding of interdependence or interconnectivity as being important to a full understanding of compassion. A jumper, an inanimate object, can thus be seen as displaying interconnectivity in its most simple form. A jumper cannot exist on its own. It doesn’t simply appear in a magic box when we click our fingers. In order for a jumper to exist, we need the wool, the sheep, the farmer, the factory, the truck, the road, the store and you. And those things in turn are dependent on limitless amounts of other things. Everything and everyone needs all the other things and people in order for them to happen or exist.

The second event, and in my opinion, given the intimacy of the first event, weaker of the two, was entitled “The Culture of Compassion”. This event was open to the public, with a live audience of around two thousand five hundred people but with many more watching live on-line. This event had a range of performers and awards. One award, entitled the Dalai Lama’s Youth Compassion Award, was won by a local boy who had shown “genuine compassion”. Unfortunately I was unable to meet the winner, however I did have the pleasure of making the acquaintance of the committee made up of young people who
introduced the winner and worked tirelessly, from all corners of the world, to choose such a deserving winner. For me this was one of the major highlights of my short stay in Derry.

My final day in Derry will certainly never be forgotten. I was given the unique opportunity of going sight-seeing with a man who could not himself see the sights but nevertheless knew them in greater depth than I know the back of my own hand. Richard Moore is without a doubt one of the most inspirational people I have ever had a chance to meet. It is impossible to walk down a street with him, without being stopped by countless numbers of the local community who so rightly idolise and love him. Before my trip to Derry I knew very little of the history of Ireland, its impact on Northern Ireland and, in particular, Derry. I realised that I nevertheless had strong opinions about its politics but found that these views have most certainly now changed. Derry is one of those "must visit" cities and not just to see the sights, but also to hear its true history and perhaps attend one of the many events being hosted as part of this year’s festivities.

The Educating the Heart event included a number of interactive sessions. During the last of these all of the attendees were asked to write down and share their feelings and intentions arising out of the event. I wrote that I would like to share my experiences from the event with my fellow students and teachers at Dame Allan’s. When I walked around the city walls of Derry with Richard I asked him if he would consider visiting Dame Allan’s to share his ideas around “Educating the Heart” and the power of forgiveness. He agreed immediately and has since asked if he might visit us on 8th November. Out of this and the Educating the Heart event I would also like to try and create some kind of link or association between Dame Allan’s and St. Joseph’s School in Derry.

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