

Cultural Conversations

Workshop for Young People

University Centre Peterborough



Rowan Williams' address

Discussion later on, because you don't want to be sat here listening to me all day, so let's work for that. My plan is to talk for maybe 10-15 minutes to start with, and if I go too much over that and you start checking your phones and so forth, I'll try and shut up. First thing to say, obviously, about the word culture is the number of things, the number of different things it means.

When we talk about culture, we can mean the inherited culture we have, the culture we have from our country, our language, all sorts of things like that. We talk about an environment being multicultural, where lots of people with very diverse backgrounds of that sort, inherited backgrounds, are mixing together. And for all the people who get very rude sometimes about multiculturalism, the value of that kind of vision is quite simply different histories coming together.

And to understand how humanity itself works, you've got to understand lots of different histories. My history is not the only one that matters. The place I stand is not the only place from which you can see things.

Some of the really interesting 20th century philosophers have said that to know anything needs more than one person, quite simply because where I stand or where I sit, I can't get around everything at once. To see what's in between us, I need where you're sitting and where you're standing to get a full picture. So in that sense, multiculturalism is simply a matter of cooperation, imaginative cooperation, producing a feeling of a world we share, because lots of very diverse positions are being drawn in.

Each one of us then sees more than they can see as an individual, and that leads on to the second level to which the word culture works. We don't just inherit culture, do we? We produce it. We make a difference.

What I say builds on what I've heard. And what I say hasn't been said before. Even if you're a clergyman like myself, what I say hasn't been literally completely said before.

I still have to think about it. I still have to make it new. But generally in society, we inherit and we make.

Societies vary in how much they value, how much they appreciate the making side of it. There are eras in history when the making, the innovating side, is a bit kind of solid. There are eras when, surprisingly, things really kind of speed up.

I think looking at the history of Europe, at least, you can say that somewhere between around 1500 and 1700, things speeded up a lot, what with printing, with the expansion of people's geographical horizons beyond Europe and so on. It's a very fast process. And in the last 20 years or so, we've been through, I think, a similar period.

We're speeding up, especially in technology, and not least in information technology. I belong to that generation that really had to learn how to use email. Remember email? For my children's generation, they're already overtaken by their children's generation.

And yeah, it just rolls on like that. So the speed varies, but the fact remains, we all, whether we like it or not, are making a difference. That means we're finding new ways of, I suppose you'd have to call it making meaning together, making sense together, finding ways in which we can get along with one another a bit more creatively, a bit more imaginatively, finding ways in which we can produce things that enrich or enlarge the world we're in.

So inherited culture, but also the culture that, very broadly speaking, we think of in terms of art. The new things that give us new things to think about, new dimensions of the imagination. And this is where the life of culture in a city or a country, a country in the second sense, becomes so important.

We don't just, it seems as human beings, do our duty and do what we have to do. We mess around with it. We think again about it.

We find new and bizarre ways of doing it. We don't just, like cows, graze on the grass. The equivalent is we serve up elaborate plates of flavoured grass woven into imaginative patterns.

We don't just eat, we have meals, and we have a culture around meals, a culture of cookery. We don't just do this, that or the other, we make something of it. And with art, we make something deeper, more challenging sometimes, more difficult.

And that making of challenging and difficult things, that reflecting back on our life together that pushes the envelope a bit, that's the heart of this second element of culture, not just inherited but made. And it connects at first, because to do that kind of culture of making a difference, you need all those different perspectives. And we are in a multicultural environment, it's fantastic if you have different inherited cultures coming together to make a sort of created culture, an artistic culture, that's even richer than you imagined.

And you know, we live in a country where at best that happens, and at worst, for all sorts of political and social reasons, people panic and think it's much more comfortable in my corner. But coming finally to what this day is about, the visit here and the Peterborough Cultural Partnership and Initiative, why does all this matter for a city? Philosophers in the ancient world used to think that a city was a place where you found your soul. Now looking around, I would guess there are lots of different views about the soul in this room, whether we have one or not.

But if you look at the soul as that dimension of you, which is mysterious, growing, unique, then living in a really vital conversational exchange of different cultures, different

perspectives, with the energy, the courage to do new things, that's how your soul gets built. And cities need souls. Human communities need vision.

They need the vision that gives them the courage to ask awkward questions, not just recycle stuff. They need the vision that moves them, makes the environment we live in, quite literally the physical environment we live in sometimes, not just boxes but homes to inhabit and decorate. We need to find ways of living that can give us hope, trust, and again the imaginative courage to keep moving forward.

And so that's why in the life of the city, as in the life of the whole country, that second element of culture, the creative, the imaginative, comes in so deeply, so very importantly. So that's the gist of what I wanted to share. Two elements of this word culture, what we inherit and how we pool it in the mixed environment of a society like ours in the UK now, and that second element of the challenging, the creative, the awkward and the difficult.

