

BURY GRAMMAR SCHOOL BOYS

Cologne Assembly November 20, 2015

What are the three hardest words to say in the English language? According to many, but thankfully not Josh Isherwood in 1UC as he has three of them as pets, it's 'squirrel'; maybe 'anemone' or quite possibly the word that means a narrow strip of land with sea on either side that connects two larger landmasses. I cannot say it properly so ask your Geography teacher if you want to know what it is! But I'm not talking about words which are hard to say, as in pronounce, but words which it is hard for us to utter. Popular wisdom holds that it is extraordinarily difficult for people to utter the words 'I love you.' How can three such easy words, two pronouns and one verb, cause such anxiety, such soul-searching? Maybe because we English are so stiff-upper-lipped that we genuinely find it too difficult to show our emotions and to say what we really feel. Until, perhaps, it is too late.

I am going to throw another verb into the mix. Instead of 'I love you', think about how easy or rather how hard it is for you to say 'I forgive you'. We have all been selfish, we have all been thoughtless, and we have all been cruel. We see it in all communities, including this one. We have all had people be mean, nasty and cruel to us. Yet how easy is it for us to say 'I forgive you' to the people who antagonise us? All major religions of the world implore us to forgive those who trespass against us, yet it is never that simple.

After all, why would we ever want to forgive someone who has hurt us? Forgiveness takes practice, honesty, open-mindedness and a willingness to try. It isn't easy. Perhaps you have already tried to forgive someone and just couldn't do it. Perhaps you have forgiven and the person did not show remorse or change his or her behaviour or own up to his or her offences – and you find yourself unforgiving all over again. It is perfectly normal to want to hurt back when you have been hurt. But hurting back rarely satisfies. We think it will, but it doesn't. If I slap you after you slap me, it does not lessen the sting I feel on my own face, nor does it diminish my sadness over the fact that you have struck me. Retaliation gives, at best, only momentary respite from our pain. The only way to experience healing and peace is to forgive. Until we can forgive, we remain locked in our pain and locked out of the possibility of experiencing healing and of being at peace. We don't forgive for others. We forgive for ourselves. We forgive in order to be able to move on.

So how would you feel if people had not just insulted you, spat at you or kicked you in the ribs? Imagine the trauma you would feel if your nearest and dearest had been killed in the most barbaric way? How would you cope if not just an individual or even a group of individuals had turned against you but a whole nation? I would imagine that the trauma you would witness or experience would live on in your memory. Even years later they would cause fresh pain each time you recalled them.

It is easy for me to stand here and talk about forgiving when, goodness knows, I find it difficult to immediately forgive boys here when they have been especially lazy, silly or sometimes (but thankfully rarely) malicious. So I don't know that I would ever find it within my heart to forgive a person, a group of individuals or a nation that had acted in the way I have just mentioned. In other words, I don't know that I would ever be able to move on if, God forbid, I were ever to find myself in that set of circumstances. I do want to talk today, however, about someone who had that capacity to forgive. You boys talk quite openly about 'legends', meaning people you admire, people who have been influential and even inspirational in your lives. Someone whom I consider to be a 'legend' is a man who died in 1999 at the age of 101, someone who had taught at Bury Grammar School even before I did, someone who was responsible for our exchange programme with the Deutzer Gymnasium in Cologne which has just celebrated its 60th anniversary. That man was Doctor Arnold Meier. He is my 'legend' because he embodied that spirit of forgiveness which many of us find so difficult to embrace. He was a German Jew who had the means and the foresight to flee Nazi Germany in the early 1930's before the persecution of the Jews began there in earnest. Several members of his immediate family and his friends were not so fortunate and they perished in the concentration camps. How would we feel if that had happened to us? Would we ever be able to forgive those individuals who were responsible for our loved ones' deaths? Would we ever be able to forgive the German nation? Arnold Meier DID forgive. He settled in Bury, came to Bury Grammar School to teach German and French and set up the exchange with the school at which he had been a pupil in Germany, the Deutzer Gymnasium. He hoped that by helping boys to forge friendships with former enemies, the old hatreds and prejudices could be overcome because prejudice and hatred are borne of ignorance and fear. If you don't understand something, you are frightened of it. Arnold Meier was a remarkable man and it was a great privilege to have known him. He would have been astounded but delighted that the exchange is still running after 60 years unbroken. That, boys, is why I have been and still am so keen to maintain the exchange with Cologne. We owe Arnold Meier a great debt of gratitude and that spirit of forgiveness, especially in today's world given the atrocities we witness regularly, is something to which we and all men can aspire.

Sixty years, then, is a remarkable achievement. The BGS exchange with Cologne is the longest-running exchange programme for a German school with a foreign school and one of the longest-running for a British school with one abroad. We held a commemoration in school on 8th November and I am very grateful indeed to the Development Office for their help with the organisation. About 130 people who have had an association with the exchange came to school to re-live their memories and to meet old friends. Boys, now men, who had taken part, travelled over from Germany especially for the occasion to meet their old exchange partners and thereby made Arnold Meier's vision a reality. We were fortunate enough to have several members of the first ever exchange, now in their late 70's, come into school. It was amazing and moving to hear them speak so fondly of the programme and what it had meant to them. They could remember virtually every kick of the football match. You boys are rarely aware of how important your school days are in your life but you are very fortunate to be in a school where tradition is important. I do hope that is something that you will take with you when you eventually come to leave Bury Grammar School. Nothing would please me more than being able to come back into school in ten or twenty years' time to find that the exchange is still running. That would be the greatest testament to Arnold Meier.

Mr Lee

<http://www.bgsboys.co.uk/bgsb/cologne-assembly/>