

'SHOW ME BETTER AND I MUST CHANGE'

Justin Keating as Exemplar of a Growth Mind

By Prof. Connell Fanning

Justin Keating's 'ethic of opinions' can protect us from the thoughtless polarisation of opinions and their confrontational expression which are undermining the political-social conversation of so many places today.

Nothing Is Written in Stone (2017), the posthumous publication of Justin Keating's late reflections on his life of thinking and the ideas shaping his opinions, is a timely opportunity to enter into a dialogue with an attractive mind, which can show us how to shape, use, hold and think about our opinions.

Justin Keating (1930 - 2009)



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Keating was a farmer, veterinarian, university lecturer, journalist, broadcaster, politician, government minister, and humanist. In his role in all of these activities, especially as a member of the Irish Labour Party, he was part of a modernisation movement in Ireland. He was also a husband, father and friend to many.

As a public figure, he was one of the 'company' I choose to keep' for my viewing and reading in teenage years although, only now, do I see clearly what good company he was in the Ireland of those times.

With his range of interests and talents, he brings to mind the quip by Orson Welles, possibly at a sparsely attended student meeting in Trinity College, Dublin: "Good evening, ladies and gentleman. My name is Orson Welles. I am an actor. I am a writer. I am a producer. I am a director. I am a magician. I appear on stage and on the radio. Why are there

so many of me and so few of you?" It is hard not to feel the same about Justin Keating – how can there have been so many of him, and only one of me?

The quality of the mind forged through these experiences is what matters most for us today: a likeable intelligence, thoughtfulness and desire for a better life for all, and a passionate wondering with wide and deep interests. These qualities were always on display in the intensity and directness with which he presented his broadcasts. They were the magnets attracting me, unaware at the time, to his thinking.

For those who are ready to enter into a dialogue with Keating, the book *Nothing Is Written in Stone* (2017), lovingly constructed by his editors from his late reflection notebooks, wonderfully conveys a great sense of his evolving ways of knowing the human and natural world.

Lesson of a Growing Mind

In a 'post-truth' world of opinions based on ['fake-news'](#), ['half-truth'](#), and ['alternative facts'](#) it is becoming essential for genuine conversation for each of us to be aware, as perhaps never before, *how we form and hold our opinions*. Keating's journey throws much light on the core issue of the *intention with which we engage in discussions* and whether *we are open to changing our minds* about a matter in a *reasoning dialogue*. It poses the question to us of how often, from the outset, we are resistant to changing our opinions no matter how unreasonable our position turns out to be in a discussion.

Engaging with Keating's way of making sense of the world raises a question which each of us must answer when we hold a different opinion from that of another person with whom we are in conversation: How do I decide to continue holding my opinion about something or to let it go? Ideally we answer explicitly to ourselves and, even better, to our conversant. However, if we do not do so with awareness, we do so implicitly and then at the risk of dogmatism.

*"You cannot teach an old dogma
new tricks"*

Dorothy Parker

Acquiring opinions and expressing them – indeed *using* them – is something we do every day. Therefore, first, *how we form our opinions or take on our opinions* from the surrounding 'climate of opinion' and, second, *how we hold them and express them* is fundamental to the quality of our individual daily conversations. In the aggregate, these conversations shape the quality of our organisations and the tone of our society.

Keating does not strike one as inflicted with the three features which Fr William McNamara, a monk in the Carmelite Order at the Spiritual Life Institute, Holyhill, Co. Sligo, suggested (RTE Radio 1, December 2003) characterised Ireland: Mediocrity, Mendacity, and Manipulation.

In a time when many are no longer content with instant coffee, too many appear content with instant opinions. We live in haste so, unavoidably, most opinions are not thought through. Too many of them, unfortunately, are also absorbed second-hand from our celebrity-driven culture and held defensively or aggressively.

To guard against this personal disposition, and to counter this tendency in society, we can, if we wish, look to good examples to observe the methods and ethics relating to their personally forming opinions and to holding of their opinions. Such exemplars can help us to develop the attitude required for good conversation and genuine dialogue.

"Being sure of something is one thing; knowing why one is sure is another."

Richard Skemp, Mathematician

In this regard, Justin Keating stands out in the same way [we saw](#) in the life of another mind as shown in Andy O'Mahony's recent book, *Creating Space: The Education of an Irish Broadcaster* (2016).

Honest, direct about himself and his life, Keating was very aware that, where there was some opinion he was carrying, he *had to be* open to change. He frankly admits that he made many and great changes in his philosophy, ideas and positions. And we can see that he did so without losing his standing on the values that defined his character. The way Keating formed his opinions and held them provides a standard for all of us by which we can daily measure ourselves and grow our minds.

How to Hold Opinions

The philosopher, Bertrand Russell, expressed well the core value underlying minds of the quality of Keating when he said that 'the scientific outlook':

".. lies not in what opinions are held, but in how they are held; instead of being held dogmatically, they are held tentatively, and with a consciousness that new evidence may at any moment lead to their abandonment" (1950: 26; emphases in original).

The practical import of this value for a time when facts no longer matter is conveyed by the famous quip attributed to John Maynard Keynes: "When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?" We operate in a world today where this value is becoming almost extinct in public life. We can hardly envisage Bertrand Russell killing, or even deliberately harming, anyone for his opinions.

"I would never die for my beliefs because I might be wrong."

Bertrand Russell, Philosopher



Version © Mike O'Donnell
(from Gary Larson's *From the Far Side*)

Keating's book, with a most apt title from a phrase in his notebooks, is a beautiful expression of 'Russell's Principle':

*"One might say that since my retirement I have been reworking my paradigm. In that reworking I have reached conclusions, but as a humanist with a scientific training. **I hold those conclusions lightly. It is a point of honour not to remain 'true to my beliefs'.** On the contrary: **the honour lies – if you show me better – in changing.** And I hold these beliefs with various degrees of firmness and subject to continuous revision, so that they almost certainly contain inconsistencies. I have been modifying the software of my brain for all my conscious life. I hope to be doing so until the day I die (p.4, second emphases added).*

Changing an opinion is often hard. We may say to someone with a different opinion 'I agree', but do I really change my opinion? Does my behaviour show I have changed my opinion? Even with the best of intentions, my actions often show no change of mind. Thinking is required and, as often as not, we will not think about our opinions. One reason is we are too busy. Another is that many do not matter, although some do. Most of all, however, thinking is hard and thinking through an opinion can require [much work](#).



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(original unknown)

An Honest Admission

Keating's foundational, 'liberal' value is exemplified when he says:

"The world is changed by your example, not by your opinion."

Paulo Coelho, Novelist

"I realized that I had inherited a whole ideas system just by being born in the time and at the place where my consciousness formed. I did not choose it. Part of what I got, I feel lucky about and have retained, but much I have discarded."

And, he elaborates,

"When I was in my teens I had many passionately held beliefs about almost everything, but they were quite diffuse, scattered, unconnected. The core of the paradigm was the great narrative of Communism. I also had strong opinions about food, mostly derived from my beloved aunt Mary Frances. I was very involved with gardening (here the influence was my mother) and with the countryside in general. I turned away from the city, though it was on my doorstep, to become a vet and a farmer. But the various beliefs, about God or sex or class relationships or food or global arrangements, were separate, not much worked out (though I didn't think so at the time) and held in what across the decades I can only call a 'Catholic' way, by which I mean 'certainty received via authority'. The content of my paradigm was quite different, but my method of thinking was the same as if I had been a Jew or a Muslim or Christian. I had never heard of Cromwell's explosion of exasperation: 'I beseech you

in the bowels of Christ, conceive it possible you may be mistaken!'. I did not know enough to realise that I did not know everything.

The closing admission is an acknowledgment of holding opinions in the wrong way and an opening to a new way of knowing. The latter is reflected in what he says next:

"I would not give a fig for the simplicity this side of complexity, but I would give my life for the simplicity on the other side of complexity."

Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr
(attributed)

"But six decades later my beliefs, though all lightly held, are growing together. The particular individual, accidental influences that build our youthful paradigm are mostly worked through, many of them rejected. ...

What I think is important, not just for me but for all of us, is the *understanding that the paradigm received in childhood is a matter of accident: of where it was in the world that one's consciousness came into being. That has no more value as a life guide than any other life guide. Who can claim that the beliefs they inherited – some of which were forced upon them aged five six or seven – were the best to be had, and that clinging to them through thick and thin is somehow a virtue. To me, the opposite is true. Show me better and I must change"* (pp. 4-5, emphases added).

The admission here puts the challenge to us to grow our minds and develop our opinions.

The Honour Lies in Changing

Show me better and I must change': Could any words better convey the attractiveness of this philosophy of life? This ethic would make a useful shibboleth for good conversation and dialogue.

As Keating's wife (one of the editors) says in her preface:

" I suggest that the theme of reworking his paradigm, which lies at the heart of the book, is an attempt by Justin to re-examine and not only correct, but also acknowledge, his mistaken attitudes/stances and actions and take responsibility for them. A phrase he liked was 'If you show me better, then I must change'" (p. x, emphases added).

"In all activities, train your mind with sayings"

Buddhist Saying

The closing phrase points by implication to the important distinction between the beliefs we act on and an underlying value which shapes them. Keating's willingness to correct, acknowledge and take responsibility contrasts with a feature which is well put by an American friend, who has lived in Ireland for a long time. She a most observant person and has noticed that many people speak in a kind of code. They think that they can say anything

they like about someone and then, after a lapse of some time, can take it that everything is fine again, that they did no harm, and that they don't have to apologise or do anything about their action.

The whole extract represents a wonderful example of what William James called a person's 'vision' which James considered **the "great fact" about a person**. By 'vision' he meant "modes of *feeling the whole push - seeing the whole drift of life - on the whole preferred as one's best working attitude*". (1909/1996:20 -1).

Re-reading this extract allows us to grasp the 'great fact' about Keating - the intangible sense of 'vision' conveyed by 'feeling the whole push', 'seeing the whole drift of life', and 'on the whole preferred as best working attitude'. One can happily go along with such a movement.

Not only the integrity but also the awareness of his mind makes Keating good company for the right journey for the life of mind.

Justin Keating shows us better; he shows us that we must change; and he shows us how to hold opinions lightly. He also leads us towards understanding how it is not just for ourselves but also for our society that we must be open to changing our opinions.

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