

WATER

The Future of the Religious Society of Friends in Britain in the form of analogy

Part I

(article taken, with permission, from the journal "Plumbing Today")

I travelled much, some years back, with a particular interest in noting the methods used by different cultures in passing on necessary skills to the next generation. Many and various were the patterns and attitudes I found. Normally a brief tour of the dedicated facilities was all that was necessary, collecting one or two text-books and a few examples of the trainees' work. Only once did I find such an approach impossible. I admit that I was amazed and fascinated by what I saw on that occasion, and that of all the visits I made, this was the one that lives most strongly in my memory. I feel it worth describing in some detail.

The outside of the building, as I approached it, seemed ordinary enough. A solid, simple construction, with the usual sort of inscription over the door proclaiming it as an ancient 'Institution dedicated to the Training of Plumbers'. Having some knowledge of the techniques required for this speciality, both historically and today, I entered with expectations already formed. The scene I encountered was therefore even more of a shock than if I had had no expectations at all. At first, I could make nothing of it. None of my categories seemed to apply.

The lobby was decorated with several posters advertising various approaches to the plumbing trade; but, although bright and lively to the eye, the message they gave was far from well-defined. One, for instance, read "Come in, and give it a go!" This was printed over a background of sunny daffodils. Another said "Plumbing your way!", and showed a roomful of young people apparently dancing with figures made out of pipes and tools representing the plumbing trade. A rack of pamphlets hung from the wall. Looking at a selection of these, I saw that they used such headings as "Sharing your own practices – the way to community", "The music of pipes", and "Plumbing, not a skill but a state of mind". None of them seemed to have much connection with plumbing as I knew it.

The posters were clearly attractive to some young people, as a steady stream of recruits came in, the whole time I was there. Strangely, however, the building never seemed to become more crowded than it had been at first.

The further end of the lobby opened into a large workshop. Eddies of youngsters swirled in and out. The door was apparently never shut. Inside, there was a considerable hubbub, but it was clear that various groups were constructively engaged. I moved from group to group, an interested and silent observer.

The first group I stopped at seemed to be dismantling a large structure consisting of pipes, tanks and control boxes of different sizes. My best guess was that this had been a central heating and hot water system for a house of more than one storey. They worked with rapt attention, and it was pleasant to see the care each took not to interfere with the work of another, and indeed to give help and advice when one of their number could not discover how to undo certain joints. The pile of discarded pieces grew as I watched.

A young girl joined the group, and stood for a while taking loose pieces from the hands of the workers and adding them to the pile. "Everything is so jumbled up," she said rather disconsolately looking at the heap at her feet. "How are we going to put it together again?" At this, a hush fell on the group. After a distinctly prickly silence, someone said "Of course, we are not going to put it together again. Who needs this sort of elaborate structure? It's so yesterday!"

"But don't you want hot water?" she asked timidly.

"People had hot water long before all this appeared on the scene," they assured her, "and besides, think how many people have been poisoned by lead pipes! Why, the very word "plumber" means someone who works with lead and thereby poisons people. We are trying to stop the use of that word – there is a committee working on getting it taken off the front of this building, it is so misleading nowadays."

"These pipes are plastic," she pointed out, "can't we use them?"

"Pipes are pipes", they told her "they carry a lot of bad vibes. So many people still have copper and lead pipes. Pipes and the word "plumbing" (spoken with a grimace of distaste) make people see us as murderers! We need to get rid of the old associations.

Besides, this sort of piece is so prescriptive. Someone else has decided that this bit has to fit onto that bit, where does creativity come in? The system is geared towards subservience. 'Do it this way, or it won't work'. Today, we demand freedom, the right to be ourselves and express ourselves. Traditions do nothing but harm. There is no "right" way, for who is to judge its "rightness"?

If you aren't ready for the modern approach, of course, you are welcome to do your own thing. We don't persecute those who still need to hang onto structure. There was a group of traditionalist fuddy-duddies over by the door, didn't you see them?"

Several youngsters, however, climbed down from the remains of the piping, and wandered off.

I strolled towards the door with the girl. Sure enough, we found there a very different group sitting in a circle. They wore strange garments made, it seemed, mostly of leather, and studied a pile of ancient texts, printed in a rather Germanic script, and illustrated with woodcuts. Every now and then, one of the group squeaked excitedly and pointed to some element of a woodcut, representing, I soon saw, men at work inserting a partially inflated

pig's bladder into the loose-fitting joint of a wooden pipe. Other pictures showed the working of lead into standing pipes, rainwater heads, and other such projects of the plumber's craft around the seventeenth century. The group had already completed a model of a London stand-pipe with hand-pump. Elaborate mouldings surrounded the upper end of the pipe, and the pump handle was cast in a delightful arabesque. The whole artefact did credit to their zeal and punctilious attention to detail. All it lacked was a stone conduit delivering river water at the base.

A new-comer, thin and with an expression both intense and critical, was studying the pump, and the woodcuts.

"Aren't you mistaking the trappings for the reality?", he questioned, sharply, "Surely plumbing ought to use the materials and techniques that are the best for the job, not get stuck in some historical groove? Aren't the crowd over there (pointing to the demolition gang), correct, at least in saying that lead is poisonous?"

"Oh they only say that because they can't bear to see us get it right!", replied one of the circle, turning to face the critic. "You have only to look round this workshop to see what happens when everybody feels free to drop the traditional ways. Indeed, things have got to such a pass in plumbing that the only thing that keeps us together at all, is that we all use this workshop, and most have a lingering respect for the way things used to be done, the outward forms that the old knowledge left behind."

"And the fact that we all still call ourselves 'plumbers'", cried another, "And that won't last long if *they* have their way."

My young companion, still standing by my side, said thoughtfully, "I don't see how you are going to get any water into your pump? You could put one right beside a lake – but there are no lakes here. It's not the sort of thing that modern pipes can connect with. And you can't take it inside houses, either."

A studious circle of bent heads and busy hands was the only response to this. She moved off, looking dissatisfied.

All this time, I had noticed neither tutor nor text-book, unless the woodcuts could be so termed. At one end of the room there was a raised area, the sort of place where a teacher might have stood at some time in the past. It would at least allow me to cast a glance all round the room over the heads of the students. I climbed up, and looked around. I then saw that there was indeed what seemed to be a teacher, in a corner of the large workshop, talking quietly with a few, a very few, students, who sat (or slouched) near him. I walked over to hear what he had to say.

"What is the function of a plumber?" he was asking as I came up.

"To mess around with pipes", said one lad.

“To mend stuff”, said another. The teacher waited. A lanky girl slid a look at a page of notes in her hand and smirked.

“To get water from the source to the person who needs it!” she recited.

“Yes”, said the teacher, “and to dispose of waste with care. Unless you know what you are trying to do, you are not likely to find the best way of doing it. Is it not so, Simon?”, looking kindly on a boy with his head hanging down and hair obscuring his expression.

“How do we know there is a source?” muttered Simon.

“Have you never drunk? If you drink, there is a source”.

“There is never much comes my way,” was the answer, “I lie in the rain with my mouth open, and get a few drops, I suppose.”

“That’s good, Simon! You know the taste of pure water, then! We can use you to test the quality of what we manage to tap from other places. Help us, please! Now, have you all completed the task I set last week? Who has put together the circuit shown in the diagram I gave you?”

“I tried!”, called a cheerful young woman, swinging her pony-tail and giving it a flip. “I tried three times! Couldn’t make it come together, somehow. Do I get marks for trying?” Her eyes were flitting around the room as she spoke.

“I think you were not giving much attention to what you were doing, if you repeatedly failed. It takes attention.” And the teacher waited again.

“I don’t like following diagrams”, said another student, “I’d rather find my own way. I did finish a circuit of my own, though. Look!”

“Yes,” said the teacher after examining the model she held, “Well done. But you must now measure the volume of the structure you have created and consider if it will fit into the space there is for it. Also consider the amount of piping you used, in comparison to that used in the diagram.”

“That’s not fair!” cried the student, “You’ve done it loads of times, and you got it out of a book! Of course yours is more efficient and fits the space!”

“Then why not learn from my example? It is your privilege to be in a position to make something even more efficient and better adapted to use than your predecessors, but only if you start from the best they managed. Understand that first. If you insist on starting all over again from the beginning, you are hardly likely to do as well as the most old-fashioned text-book you could find. No scientist, no technician, no practitioner of any art can afford to neglect the tradition.”

A large, freckled young man was lowering himself with some difficulty into the rather small chairs that were placed in a rough circle round the teacher.

“Making circuits, are we?” he broke in, “I used to struggle with that at that at one time. I used to think that the point of being a plumber was to get a system up and running, all the circuits in place. I have to say, I never really managed it. But if I had, what would there be to do then? *Bor-ing*. No, no, I have discovered that the point of learning plumbing is to become better and better at the processes, without thinking of it as having some ulterior purpose. We are not trying to *get* anywhere! Learn to enjoy your work, I say, and being with your work-mates in a jolly crowd.”

“Besides,” added another boy, holding some bits of poorly articulated tubing, “If we did it all perfectly, we should become frightfully full of ourselves, I know plenty like that.”

The late-comer was heaving himself off his chair again, and reaching a hand towards the girl opposite. “Come along Liz!”, he called, “Up you get! Bun-fight time! Sorry folks! Catering Committee, you know. How any work at all gets done in this place I can’t imagine, what with keeping you lot fed and looking after the money and all the rest of it.”

The teacher watched them with a face of grave and endless patience. I could have believed that he was thinking of something entirely different, except that he was so clearly aware of every word and movement, every current of thought among them. His eyes showed, not inattention, but a sense of life in a far wider world, in which what was taking place in the workshop before him, though it represented his immediate concern, formed a very small part.

All at once, an excited hubbub arose from a group of students not far off. Clapping and cheers broke out. I could not see what they were looking at, and walked over, with some curiosity. Pushing through the crowd of on-lookers, which was getting bigger as others ran up, I came to a point where I could see, over the shoulders in front of me, an elaborate, pyramidal structure, with various waving arms and flower shaped attachments, all crafted out of pipes and tubes of all sizes from those resembling drain-pipes to tiny flexible tubes. It certainly had some dramatic impact and could even have been considered a rather fine sculpture, especially when those around began playing coloured lights over it from torches they waved in their hands.

“It’s very nice,” said a little voice at my side, “but it’s not plumbing”. It was the same young girl who had annoyed the demolition crew. To my surprise, her words clearly carried through the hullabaloo to the ears of a lady who must have been the creator of the piece in question. She was standing looking large and stately on a chair, acknowledging the plaudits of the crowd. Her head whipped round, and her expression changed on the instant from satisfaction to fury. “And who are you to say what is and what isn’t plumbing? I have my certificate as a qualified plumber – can you say as much? No, I thought not. I am fully as competent as anyone else to define plumbing, and I say this is plumbing!”

Simon edged into view at the other side of the crowd. "Plumbing is the transfer of water from the source to the person who needs it.," he quoted. There was a sudden silence.

"Simon dear, you are so right!" said the large lady, "only of course we must not be literal about this. We don't want to turn into fundamentalists, now do we? I create beautiful objects, they are like water in the desert to souls starved of beauty. The source of this beauty is in my imagination, and I have externalised it into a form in which the masses can drink of it! This is plumbing indeed!"

I heard a few titters, but most of the crowd shouted "Bravo! Good for you, Sheila!"

"How wonderful is the human imagination!", she went on enthusiastically, "It produces every good thing that delights the heart of man!"

"Or woman!" someone put in.

The speaker gave an impatient flounce, and continued, "It picks up and uses the dear old associations of this ancient building, and these quaint pipes, and fuses them into an evocation of our highest aspirations!"

"Could this sort of thing not be displayed outside, then?" asked a young man, languidly interlaced with his girl, " why choose a workshop where we have been in the habit of channeling literal water for some years now? That, surely, is not a product of human imagination."

" Why, the very words you use are the product of human imagination! I defy you to say what this "water" you talk about really is. It is just as much a product of your imagination as anything else. Besides, where, pray, could I find a sheltered space and an audience like this one? (smiling round). There are none in this provincial little place that are half so suitable for me. We need a space like this," and she waved her hand around the workshop.

"Well, you are not taking space from us!", called a bevy of leather-coated lead-workers. "We are the only people who do any real plumbing round here! We know what plumbing meant to the founders of our trade, and as far as we are concerned it means the same now!", and they advanced towards the sculpture with a determination to get rid of it in every angular movement.

I stepped aside hastily. A line of students linked arms and faced the on-coming phalanx. But the rapidly escalating situation was interrupted by a bellow from a huge, black-haired fellow who had been watching silently from a low couch full of brightly coloured cushions. "Avast there!" he thundered, standing up and stretching his muscular arms above his head before turning them into a prow with which he cut his way through the sea of faces. "We don't want this place shut down, do we? We all want to keep coming here? What does it matter what we do or what we each call "plumbing"? There is plenty of room for everybody, isn't there? Nobody asks you what you think plumbing is, before

you are allowed in here. Thank goodness for that. Just calm down, and get on with having fun in your own way with those who want whatever you want. Let's just leave each other alone, OK?"

"OK, Bill", "thanks, Bill", came from several sides, and the crowd broke up into a number of groups as before.

"But people still need to drink," said Simon.

Just then, some sort of call went up from the door, in response to which many of the trainees put down their work and made their way out. I was interested to note that people from all the groups were answering the call, and streamed out side by side. One of those left behind asked his neighbour "What's going on? Where are they all going?"

"There is a lot of trouble round here with subsidence", the neighbour answered. "You know, homes crack and fall apart because the earth shrinks under them. People here are on a call-out system, they go to salvage and prop up and do what they can to help the families involved. I admire their goodwill, and I sure admire their energy."

"You don't go, though?"

"I used to. I just can't see the point any more. The subsidence goes on. The water table is falling, and we don't know what to do about that. The earth is drying out and shrinking, and we might as well enjoy what we still have while we have it. They want to help, and I see that they help individuals in the short term. But I feel that something far more fundamental is needed. Besides, I am in the middle of a project, I don't have the time. Besides," with a grin, "I am lazy."

There was now more room to circulate in the workshop, and I made a last round, this time attending not to the defined groups, but to many individuals who were scattered about pursuing their own private concerns. These, it appeared, all related to rather exotic methods of acquiring water. One worked under a banner saying "Water from Palm Leaves", and was busy chopping several large leaves into smaller and smaller pieces, and crushing them in a large bowl. One was collecting and condensing the hot air from the workshop, and extracting the humidity breathed into it by the mass of students. Another was tending a row of plants on a windowsill, whose roots had been trained in every direction outside the building. They were all very willing to talk about the virtues of their own water source, but they were not in the least interested in other projects going forward in the workshop. Several were surrounded by the debris of a number of earlier enthusiasms, and clearly moved on from each quite fast.

Having other calls to make, I left the building at this point, considerably exercised in my mind as to what could be the future for a training school with such a diverse assortment of students; why the teacher did no more to control the attention and activities of those under his care; and how, indeed, the ordinary needs for washing and drinking facilities would be met in the future in this locality.

Part II

(letter to the Editor, Plumbing Today)

Dear Editor,

I was very interested to read the article in your last edition, about the training of plumbers in my home town. I trained as a plumber myself, and the article made me quite nostalgic. Not that many people learnt much plumbing in our Institute, but it had a sort of heady atmosphere where anything was possible. And anyone who wanted to learn could learn. We had a first-class teacher, it was just that not many people wanted to be taught. In fact, looking back on it, I am amazed that those confident and highly motivated groups never actually pushed the teacher out. I think they probably hardly noticed his presence. He became invisible. They were completely focused on their own activities. Besides, the building had been erected and was maintained from the public purse, and without a certain residual nodding towards the stated purposes for which it was registered, they might well have found themselves homeless.

Your readers might think it was even more extraordinary that the teacher never left of his own accord, if he had so little control, and was so little in demand. Was he not wasting his talents? You would have to know him to understand that. He would never leave, as long as two or three students wanted to learn. Nor was he in the least disturbed by the absence of interest among the majority. It was not his way to apply pressure. He used to say that only those who longed for any skill were likely to acquire it. Yet I think that what went on in that workshop was more influenced by his quiet and undemanding presence than most of the students knew. The quality of his being, if I can use that phrase, his inner strength and calm, somehow diffused itself among them all, and added to their zest and their relative toleration of each other, and showed perhaps in their concern to help others.

Your readers may like to know a little about what happened to this facility over the next few years. The various groups, of which a number were described in the article you printed, seemed to take it in turns to dominate the place. First it was the “demolition squad”, who did manage to get the term “plumbing” chipped off the entrance, and debarred from the posters. They soon, however, ran out of work, and went off. Next, the group who were determined to look and act like seventeenth century plumbers had a brief period of glory. Some youngsters found their certainty and discipline reassuring. But most potential students soon felt their methods much too cramping of individual style, and revolted in the name of self-expression and discovery. The place is now a “Celebrate the Human” Centre, the sole connection with plumbing being rather more focus on sculpture using tubular forms than is usual. I think they get some sort of arts grant. The other groups migrated to other workshops, where their interests predominated. The result was a much greater degree of separation between the different approaches.

Jenny and I married, and have two children (Jenny was the girl whose blunt speaking so annoyed people). I don't know where our teacher went. I still work as a plumber.

yours truly,
Simon Price

Part III

from T.S.Eliot, *The Waste Land*, 331-359

Memorandum to Committee Co-ordinating Training in the Current Crisis

The article and letter I have ventured to attach to this memorandum are provided simply to give Committee members some background on the origins of the rather peculiar problems that have arisen in the small area in which I have been charged with certain responsibilities. They record the state of affairs as I encountered it myself many years ago. I find myself in this place again by the merest chance, if such things are ever mere chance. Naturally, the surrounding environment has become very different in the intervening years. I feel, however that some aspects of the present situation are still heavily influenced by the nature of the central training facility in those days.

As we all know, the drought afflicting the country is steadily getting worse, and has reached a critical stage. I am convinced that in this area, it is even worse than normal. This is at least partly a consequence of the severe shortage of plumbers. It is also the case that residents here cannot easily call whatever assistance there is locally, as there is no commonly accepted term for the job that used to be expected of "plumbers". It is impossible for them to express what they want, or to discover what tradesmen are offering. Nor are there any working institutions for training in the necessary skills.

As a result, a very great deal of the small amount of water available in the area leaks out in unproductive ways, and becomes contaminated and murky underfoot. The inhabitants scrape up each drop they find, or dip cloths to lift some wetness to their lips. Malaise spreads. Faces have become hardened behind hopelessness, anxiety, and the sort of frantic search for immediate gratification that brings no real joy, which we are told was common in the plague years of earlier centuries. Homes are cracked or falling, and such parts as stand are indescribably filthy. The general level of misery would be hard to overstate.

I was asked to provide recommendations on the best way to tackle the problems of this area. I offer the following first thoughts:

1. People, in this area at least, hardly know any longer what pure water tastes like. They no longer believe that there is a source which could supply them. Those few who remember the old days, clamour at the doors of the old Institutes which once offered such knowledge and gave help. The fact that they do not find help there, leaves them bitter and disillusioned. We need to make clear to everybody that no help can be expected in that direction. We need to demolish, or clearly mark with some quite different use, all such buildings. We need to start again from scratch.

2. I do not doubt that in some areas, there are Institutes which have students of sufficient humility and sufficient honesty to learn useful skills and communicate appropriately with each other. In such places, a true teacher may operate. I would expect that in those areas, the drought would be found to be less intense. Even such places should know, however, that they are under siege from the wider world, and must expect to be undermined and impeded in their work by powerful forces unless great care is taken. This may include much greater scrutiny of those applying to transfer from other areas to train with them, to discover what their attitudes are, and what they have learnt to call "plumbing". An "open door" policy may be dangerous.

3. In this area, since all buildings totter and disintegrate, the people must learn to live out of doors. They must turn into a band of wanderers, carrying very little baggage, and searching, searching for a source of water. Those with a residual sense for picking up the scent of water must lead. In this connection, I have located and spoken to Jenny and Simon Price. They are both genuine and conscientious plumbers, struggling with a nearly impossible working environment. They have promised to join the search. If the search becomes the central feature of enough lives, it is possible that a new spring may break out among them. Such things have been known.

4. Once the source is found, all searchers must be guided to drink their fill, and re-learn the value and wonder of pure water. Sharing such an experience, after years of drought, will bind them together as nothing else could. They will long to bring such water to others. Vanity and egoism, doubt and division, will melt away before the reality of what they experience together. Then reconstruction can begin.

5. This might start with a large-scale storage facility as close to the source as possible, to minimise the possibility of water leaking out or impurities gaining access. The way there should be clearly marked from each street. People would learn to make the, admittedly time-consuming and strenuous, journey each day, and re-learn, too the joy of pure, uncontaminated water coming straight from the source. They would learn to distinguish pure water by its taste, and could then be of the utmost use in monitoring later supplies.

6. Those showing aptitude will then be needed to lay pipes, plan systems, and take water into the re-built homes. Such plumbers will have to be trained. Simon and Jenny are in touch with some of the old people who trained as plumbers long ago. Such people, having been laughed out of court for so many years, no longer expect to be listened to, and keep very quiet. Some of these may, with encouragement, be capable of teaching basic skills to a few young people. Much of the training will have to be “on the job”, first digging up the broken pipe-work and then laying new pipes from the central facility to local depots. This work must never turn into a routine. Workers must never forget that they are engaged in getting water to those in need in the best possible way.

7. We will have to learn to use extremely flexible and robust pipes, as the ground will be moving under us for some time yet. Rigid structures will not function. We must all learn that conveying the water is what is important, not the means by which it is conveyed. If appropriate materials are not available, their production will be a first priority. The way the water is delivered will look very different in different places, depending on what works best in a given terrain.

8. It is necessary to have, or to invent, a common language. Communication is currently so impeded and confused by the lack of this, and so much precious time and energy consumed in fruitless noise, that I cannot help feeling that this too is a priority. Until everyone involved in our huge endeavor uses the same words to refer to the same pieces of equipment and the same skills, we will waste our resources without achieving anything. It matters not what word is used, as long as its meaning is distinct (except that if we revert where possible to the words used in the old manuals, we will be able to use these without the struggle of translation, which would be an advantage, at least in the desperate state we find ourselves in at the moment). An agreement to use the same words, without agreement on the meaning of each word, is of course worse than useless and merely adds to the confusion.

9. We have to turn all our creative ingenuity to converting every aspect of our lives into an exercise in maximising our harvesting of water and minimising our waste. The

design of housing, the design of our daily lives, needs to be turned around to meet this requirement. For example, the roof should be built to slope inwards to a central tank so that every drop of rain-water can be piped to indoor uses. Houses, too, need to be simple and building materials flexible, so that subsidence is not such a problem. "Waste" water should go to nourishing trees and vegetation. A much greater degree of awareness is needed, so that people no longer immerse themselves in life without a consciousness of the need of all for water, and the effect this should have on what they do.

It will take many years before all this could show much result in terms of stabilisation of the water level and a return to normal life. We do have the advantage though, in this crisis situation, that people know themselves thirsty, know their great need for water, and therefore are prepared to make efforts and make changes to get it. Whether these efforts and changes will survive in better times depends on how carefully we train the next generation. They need exposure to the beauty of clear water in childhood, and to acquire a taste for it. They need to know the purpose of the discipline of care and reverence towards water in the home and the community.

It also depends on the presence in our midst of such a teacher as Simon and Jenny studied under. If their teacher was as described, we can be sure that someone of equal calibre will re-appear in our communities if we are willing to learn.