



school mottos aiming too high?

by Toni Wilkinson

A child's pain is unknowable, incomprehensible. Has he fallen off his bike or been taunted by bullies?
Some days it's hard to aim high.

Wilkinson's photographs implicitly suggest that we ask our children to live by a moral code that many of our political, corporate and church leaders consistently fail to live up to.

These photographs are from Toni Wilkinson's photographic exhibition 'Prolepsis' at the Perth Institute of Contemporary Arts March 2005 (exhibition photos were full colour, however Toni has allowed them to be presented in black and white format for Black Dog). The following is an excerpt from the text describing Toni Wilkinson's work written by Amy Barrett-Lennard (Director, Linden St Kilda Centre for Contemporary arts Melbourne).

'Prolepsis' is a rhetorical device in which an expected future event or characteristic is presented as though it was an already accomplished fact. School mottos, as Wilkinson suggests in her latest series of photographs, are an example of 'prolepsis' in every day life. Those high-minded slogans, usually matched with crest and emblazoned on the hats, bags, chests and ideally, the hearts of dutifully dressed school children, are designed to portray the ideals and values that these students will aspire to live by.

These mottos, statements or proclamations of hope, duty, service, achievement and godliness are literally pinned onto our children, Talisman-like, they appear to desperately, presumptuously and pre-emptively announce both individual and 'shared' core values as a means of ensuring bright, successful futures.

Wilkinson's subjects, young children and adolescents in school uniform, are photographed alone yet each of them appears somewhat overawed, whether by circumstance, environment or the burden of expectation. Photographed in unidentified, partially cultivated surroundings, perhaps on the walk to and from school, they appear overwhelmed and bewildered by the expectations of parents, institutions, governments and churches; expectations succinctly expressed through their everyday, worn-to-school mottos. Wilkinson's photographs suggest they have every reason to be.



The young subjects in Wilkinson's photographs sport a range of mottos from 'Truth', 'Courtesy', 'Caring and Sharing', 'Go forward', 'Aim High' and 'Strive for the Highest' and including 'Loyalty and Service' to 'With God for a Leader' and 'Serve God Serve One Another'. Her subjects are positioned within landscapes that seem to act as a kind of metaphor for the educational institutions, their charges and the enormity of imagined futures. Like the young people themselves, these 'natural' environments, have been shaped, pruned and cultivated to varying degrees, in the belief that it is for the betterment of society itself.

While engaged in research for this new body of work, Wilkinson came across the following statement from The Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.

Australian society has a shared sense of values that unite people and are important for accepting and celebrating diversity. Values such as tolerance, trustworthiness, mutual respect, courage compassion, honesty, courtesy and doing ones best are a part of our democratic way of life and shape our children's understanding of themselves and the world. ¹

These "shared values" apply to government run schools, while independent or religiously-based education, as Wilkinson notes ², offers additional core values generally based on church rulings as seen in mottos such as 'Service to God', 'Trust in Christ' and 'With God as a Leader'. These "shared values", particularly the secular ones, may seem at first quite worthy of promotion, however, as Wilkinson has said, "It is, I believe, difficult to easily apply these values as mottos because they are reliant upon translation and their meaning is entirely dependent on context." ³

Whose god exactly is it that we 'Serve and Follow'? And should we blindly offer 'Loyalty and Service', especially when this motto, matched with the antiquated crest representing an early colonial ship upon the Swan River, alludes to a dark, colonial past not often kind to the area's first inhabitants, descendants of whom, attend the school that has chose to brand itself this way.

The Australian Federal Government has, with increasing vigour over the past few years, aired its concerns about the values taught in schools. In 2002 Federal Education Minister Brendan Nelson, said that, "What needs encouragement and formalization in our schools is the teaching of values and building of character", adding . . . it is also time to reinvigorate school mottos". ⁴

Despite the wealth of publicity around increased funding for well resourced, non-government schools, John Howard, in January of this year, made the controversial statement that parents were moving their children out of government schools because the state system is "values-neutral". This statement, which seems to go against the findings of a recently commissioned Federal Government study, inevitably sparked bitter debate.



“Truth” stands beside a swamp, her golden hair almost at one with the dried, sun-drenched, reedy grasses. With closed eyes and teary gesture she bravely beats off the confusion of the swamplands; there is a sense of feeling ‘stuck’ and overwhelmed by the unclear, murky darkness below.

One of the Federal Government’s key answers to the so-called “values-neutral” problem was to re-instate the flying of the Australian flag in schools. In fact, Government has committed significant funds to this program and has made the flying of the Australian flag a condition of receiving federal education funding. In a recent statement issued by the Federal Education Minister, it was claimed that,

By taking pride in the flag and its presentation, schools can help support parents’ expectations that our schools will foster values such as tolerance, trustworthiness, mutual respect, courage, compassion, courtesy and doing one’s best. 5

If only the above-mentioned qualities and values, as expressed in mottos worn by Wilkinson’s school children, were so readily visible in the politicians that issues these statements. Our Government has spectacularly and regularly let us down with shameful incidents like the Tampa and children overboard affairs, the indefinite and cruel detainment of asylum seekers and the support of a pre-emptive attack on Iraq.

The Federal Government view that private, church based schools are more successfully instilling these “shared” core values in their pupils is similarly worrying at a time distinguished by the continual refusal of many church leaders to endorse birth control, women in clergy and gay marriage.

Wilkinson’s photographs implicitly suggest that we ask our children to live by a moral code that many of our political, corporate and church leaders consistently fail to live up to. One might go so far as to say that far from seeing our Church, Business and State leaders as role models they are viewed by many with cynicism and distrust.

Subtle and suggestive, these photographs are both timely and disturbing in their evocation of the hypocrisy underlying something as fundamental to a country’s well being as its education system. The uneasiness they elicit, implicitly questions the current processes and thinking that inform curriculum, values-based education and perpetuate our unequal two-tiered public/private system. Wilkinson’s young subjects stand bewildered, confused and torn between a world that purports to follow one set of values whilst living out their opposite; a world that uses a ‘values’ based argument to justify its own, often selfish and value-less ends.

About Toni Wilkinson...

Toni Wilkinson had her first solo exhibition *Tough Pleasures* at Fremantle Art Centre in November 2003. In February 2004 she took part in *Spin* at the Western Australia Museum followed by a second solo show in July 2004 at Linden, St Kilda Centre for Contemporary Arts. In August 2004 she was a participant in *Ladies and Gentlemen* at the Queensland Centre for Photography. Wilkinson was included in the City of Joondalup Invitation Art Award and the Josephine Ulrick National Photography Prize in September 2004. Works from *Prolepsis* were curated into a group exhibition *Changeling* at the Australian Centre of Photography in November/December 2004, alongside other Australian and international contemporary artists. Toni Wilkinson was featured in *Photofile*, issue 70: “Money and Power” and has had photographs published in numerous editorial publications in both Australia and overseas. She is a lecturer at Curtin University.

1. Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training website, www.dest.gov.au
2. In conversation with the artist.
3. Op.Cit.
4. Quoted in *The Age*, 23 September 2002
5. From Media Release issued by Brendan Nelson, 25 January 2005