

1 IN THE BEGINNING ...

Philip O'Carroll and I started Fitzroy Community School in the second half of 1976. The 1960s and 1970s were years of intellectual ferment. They were years when long-accepted traditional values and the traditional ways of doing things were constantly debated. Education was in the thick of these debates. So pervasive was this questioning that it influenced councils and government departments, allowing them more freedom and confidence to make "liberated" decisions. During this unique period, the government regulations that control the starting of new schools were less stringent, thus making the official registration of Fitzroy Community School possible. It is highly probable that FCS would not be allowed to start today. Many alternative schools opened during these years. Sadly, most of them had short lives. One of the few survivors of that new wave of schools is Fitzroy Community School.

Until the fated evening late in 1976, when, unable to sleep, one of us had said, "Why don't we start our own school?" and the other had replied with a "Yes", Philip and I had no intention of starting our own school in Melbourne. The decision, when it came, was sudden and spontaneous. Some hours earlier we had suffered shock and disappointment at a gruelling meeting at the inner-suburban alternative school where our children had been pupils for a few weeks.

We left that meeting with the definite realisation that this was not the school for us. But what school were we going to take our children to now? We talked late into the night. What had been the real cause of things going wrong for us at the school? What had

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been the clash in education values? We talked and talked in an effort to understand this, and to pinpoint what we were wanting for our children – and indeed for other children. It was clear that our beliefs about how best to raise children were different from the beliefs of the majority of parents at the school we'd been to. This came as a shock because our ideas had seemed to align well with the school's written philosophy. That night, after countless cups of tea, we made the momentous decision to start our own school.

What a pathway has since unfurled before us! Highs and lows, joys and woes – but with many more highs and joys than lows and woes. I cannot think of another way of life that I would have preferred. I thank God for that moment when we decided to start our own school.

Early in 1974, Philip and I had met in Albury, New South Wales – a large, provincial town on the Murray River. Our meeting was a rather odd event. Since arriving in Albury a couple of months earlier, I had heard Philip's name mentioned at several dinner parties and other social gatherings. In fact, some people had said that I sounded just like Philip O'Carroll. This made me very curious indeed, because, the only thing I knew about Philip was that he was the local philosopher gypsy, living in a horse drawn wagon. Although I liked to think of myself as philosophical, at this stage I was far from being a gypsy. I was used to a permanent roof over my head, a fully equipped kitchen, a big bath and a predictable income.

Our meeting could never have been predicted. From my university days until early in 1974, I had lived in Melbourne. Most of my friends were in Melbourne. I happened to be in Albury just then, attempting a marriage reconciliation. This was not working out,

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and I was feeling very lonely. To lift my spirits, I had decided that I should get a job, and I organised an appointment in Wodonga to meet casually with my prospective employer at what was then called the Continuing Education Centre. If he thought I could offer a course of value, we would arrange a follow-up meeting. Being a stranger in town, with no relatives there and no significant friendships yet made, I was without babysitting. Because of this, I took my two sons with me to this preliminary meeting. Timothy was three, and Nicholas was two. Interview finished, I went to visit a woman I had recently met, who was the president of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Albury/Wodonga.

When I arrived at her house, the door was opened, not by Jenny, but by a young man who looked like an incarnation of Moses: long hair, long green cardigan with holes, and bare feet. I explained that I was looking for Jenny. "Moses" said that Jenny was not at home but to come in anyway. I felt unsure about this unusual looking man, so I said thank you very much but that I would come back later. I gave the excuse that my little boys wanted me to take them to a cafe to get an orange juice.

Later when I returned, Jenny was still not at home. The man again invited me in, and this time I accepted the invitation because I felt I had to. To again decline would be making a gesture of distaste or distrust, and I didn't want to be hurtful without cause. "Moses" offered me a cup of tea, and he introduced himself as Philip O'Carroll.

As hard as it would have been for me to believe a few minutes earlier, we were soon chatting comfortably. Philip asked me why I was in Wodonga. I explained that I had been to the Continuing Education Centre looking for a job. Philip said, "What do you want to lecture in?" I answered, "Oh, something in the field of

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interpersonal relations or child development". Philip said that he was soon to conduct a series of lectures on related themes and suggested that we might co-lecture. Without a further thought, I agreed. Looking back, this seems like madness on both our parts – and perhaps it was. Or was it intuition?

Whatever it was, this spontaneous decision worked out well. Our lecture series was held at what was known as the Advanced College of Education in Albury. We found that we worked easily together. Our styles complemented each other, and the lectures were a success. The room was packed. I'm sure the local people were very curious to see how Philip O'Carroll and I, from different ends of town, could satisfactorily conduct a joint lecture series. Working together over the next few months, Philip and I got to know each other very well. During the lecture period, there had been no romantic involvement. At the time we first met, we were both wary of emotional entanglement.

During these early years of the 1970s, alternative education was in the wind. Even before I'd come to Albury, I'd been involved with groups that were discussing the pros and cons of traditional education. During these years, a significant proportion of parents and educators were weighing up current schooling and looking at the end products emerging from schools. A significant body of thought was insisting that we needed to rethink what was happening in our schools. In these education circles, the prevailing thinking was that, for both personal and societal reasons, a better and different sort of schooling was needed. The two beliefs being debated and challenged were: (i) that the current model of schooling was a satisfactory model and (ii) that the existing model of schooling was the only model possible.

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I was a member of one of these parents' circles. We became convinced that whether schooling was considered as a time of life which is valid in its own right, or as preparation for the future, traditional schools were greatly failing many students, and all students to some extent. Many schools had lots of unhappy or demoralised children, who, it looked to us, were simply serving time. We saw that some students could persist for 10 or so years in the classroom but still not gain proficiency in the formal skills of literacy and numeracy. The consensus was that many people emerged from our education system ill-prepared for adult life – whether judged by emotional or intellectual standards. Too many people were living on drugs, in anxiety, in discord, alienated, negative, unhappy. Even in the “better” schools with more facilities, or in those with more dedicated teachers, the deep-seated problems of schooling were not being addressed.

In Melbourne I had been a member of a book group that discussed Ivan Illich's forceful work *De-schooling Society*. Illich had put forward these points. He coined the incisive phrase *the hidden curriculum* – the formative influences that are embedded within the structure and lifestyle of the school but that are usually ignored because they are not part of the official curriculum. Now that I was living in Albury, I discovered that here, too, meetings were being held among groups of young parents. Did the conventional schooling model that everyone had long accepted support the newly awakened beliefs concerning how best to raise their young? I attended many of these meetings. So did Philip, who had a three-year old daughter. We spent much time discussing Illich's ideas, along with those ideas in A. S. Neill's influential book *Summerhill*.

But at the meetings, where a group of well-intentioned parents were discussing starting a school, it soon became apparent that

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often the parents did not share a common hierarchy of values. Although these parents were indeed well-intentioned, and although they might agree that traditional education (state or private) was not doing the job they wanted, they found it very difficult to reach agreement on a new vision. When it came to prioritising what they each wanted for their children, to pinpoint what they believed to be most important, conflict reigned. At these generally fruitless meetings, Philip and I consistently found that we were in agreement. We feared that the big group would never reach agreement, so, with our little pre-school children and a few friends, we decided to organise our own group ...