

Since Malcolm Knowles began teaching about “andragogy” in the USA in the 1960s, there has been a steady growth in awareness that adults learn differently from children. ‘Andragogy’ is the science, and indeed the art, of adult education. In 1984 Knowles wrote of it in a seminal work called, *The modern practice of adult education: from pedagogy to andragogy*. Originating in medieval monasteries, the term ‘pedagogy’ referred to children’s schooling styled as ‘teacher-directed’ education. The term ‘andragogy’ was deliberately coined by Knowles to stress that adult education is of a completely different character. Whereas ‘andragogy’ literally means the ‘leading of adults’, Knowles and later scholars quite consciously envisaged it as ‘self-directed’ learning.

Knowles justifies this call for a ‘self-directing’ approach as follows. Whereas children tend to learn by adding new experiences to their lives, adults come already experience-rich to the task. Adult education is never far from questions about personal identity, for “an adult is what he/[she] has done”, writes Knowles. But people do not learn simply by having experience. Learning comes from reflecting upon experience and from articulating learnings. Because adults resource each other with unfamiliar dimensions of experience, adult education is well-suited to a learning

community which welcomes differences and respects the dignity of all as learner-teachers in the school of life. Similarly, adults can be helped extend the basis of their self-reflection by exploring wisdom gained and struggled for in the human community which has journeyed ahead of them.

This being the case, those who facilitate adult learning need to be so competent and comfortable in their field that they can operate as artists opening possibilities for others’ learning. But Knowles warns that the flip-side of adults’ rich accumulation of life experience is their tendency to have developed fixed mindsets, particularly with respect to religious convictions. He therefore stresses how important it is for adult facilitators to have the capacity to build a climate of trust, so different ways of thinking and believing can be entertained in the learning community, and shifts made.

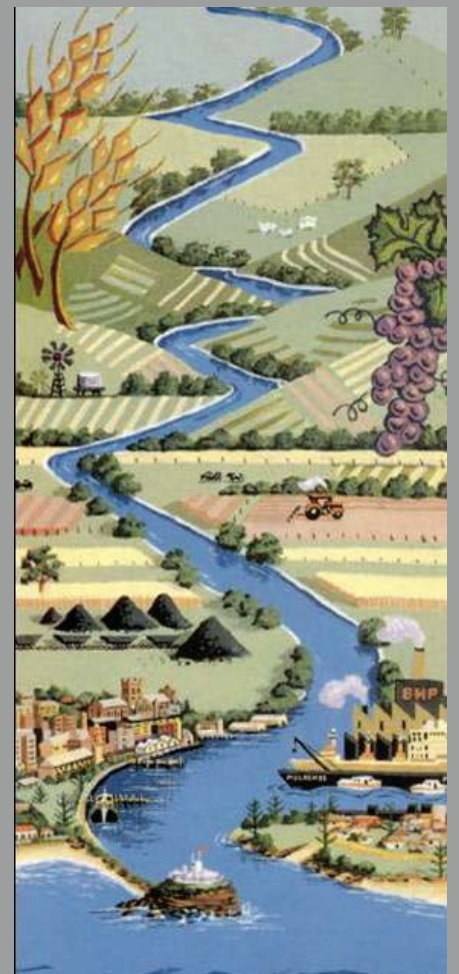
The staff of the Tenison Woods Education Centre strive to embody the theory of adult education in all their courses. A good example of this is the learning processes used in the *Christian Formation Course*. Though it is true that the course content is Christian life in the perspective of Sacred Scripture and Catholic Tradition, it is just as true to say that **the text of the course is the lives of participants and presenters**. Both andragogically and theologically, the

You are an artist of the eternal.

Behind the veneer
of our external lives
the eternal is at work.

Each human ... man or woman,
is called to minister
to the possibilities of awakening
and
realising this divine presence.

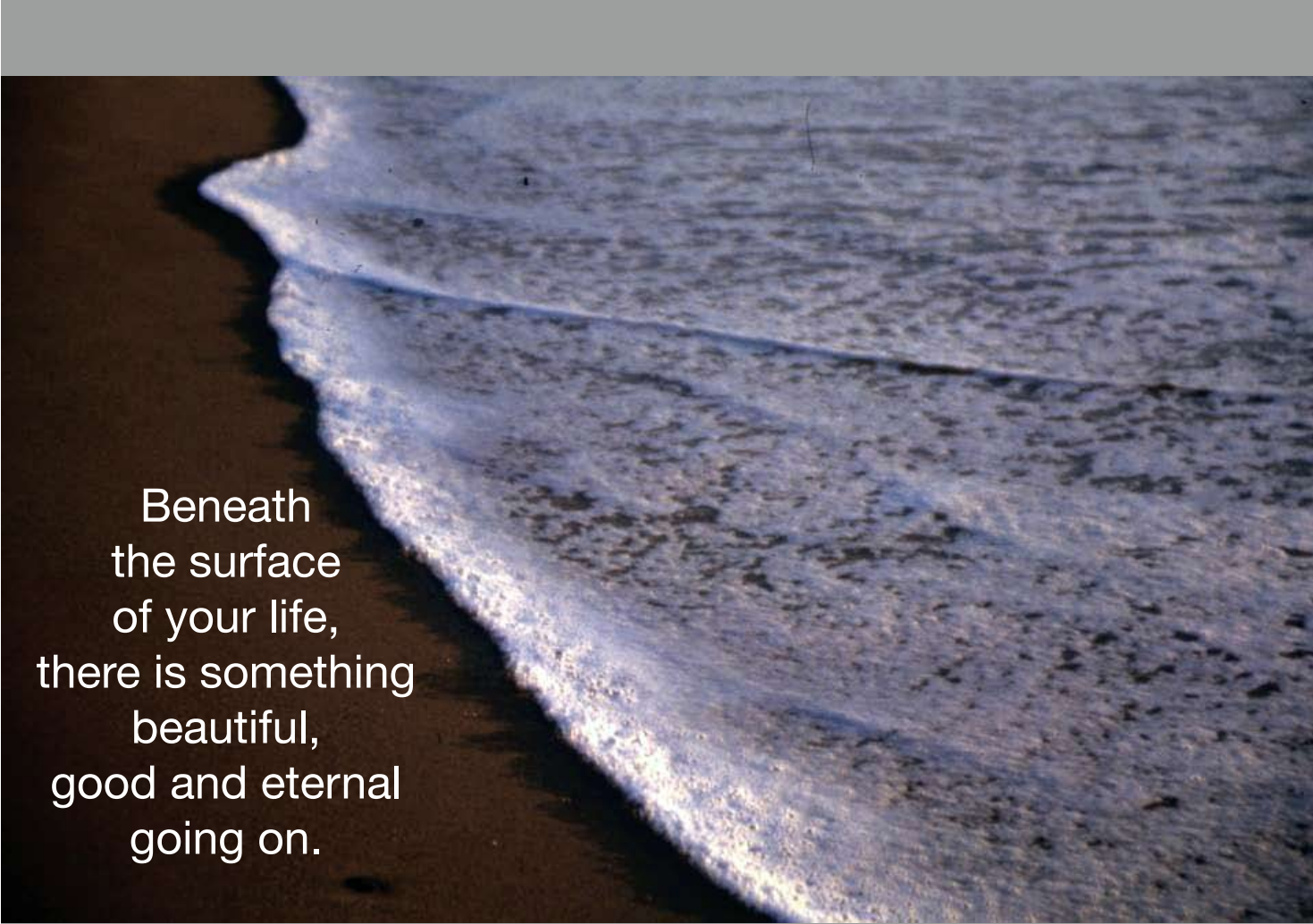
*John O’ Donohue, “The priestliness of the human heart”,
NAPPA News, Vol, 1999.*



development of a viable learning community is integral to the course. Its emphasis on reflection on human life flows from the ancient Christian belief that human experience is the very place where God is revealed, where God is drawing the person into personal and communal relationship. So the course engages people deliberately at the level of their longings, questions and struggles, and it searches their growth into conviction across their journey of faith. It directs attention to discipleship, following the adult Jesus who reveals God personally, fully and humanly.

Partly respecting 'andragogical theory', the course is entitled Christian "formation". Though it offers the fruits of rigorous scholarship, it tries not to use a 'banking' system of education where a 'syllabus' of information imparted by 'teachers' moves relentlessly on, regardless of where participants find themselves in respect to that content. Getting the balance here is often quite a challenge,

however! But God is the "formator" in Christian "formation". 'Presenters' and 'participants' are God's instruments in a community which seeks to thrive on the belief that all can be "artists of the eternal" for each other, sharing and rejoicing in the truth that "beneath the surface of [our] life, there is something beautiful, good and eternal going on."



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John O'Donoghue, in Anam Cara, p. 161.