

# A Chair in the Temple

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There's a place up the road that's warm and has a faint glow. One of my earliest memories is of being in that place, cuddled by the presence of family and listening to a gentle voice. I was dazzled by a neighbouring room's neon light, and although I don't remember a specific image of Jesus, I know he was there too. In a sense, we were in him.

In much later life - age eight - I went to school in this place, which I came to know as St Bernard's. I'd previously been attending another school, so the change was daunting, but during my preliminary visit to St Bernard's I was welcomed by a classroom of people.

When the school year began, I was cared for and encouraged, I made friends, had adventures and did all the embarrassing things kids do. Through regular assemblies at the church, and through participation in ceremonies like my first Holy Communion, my relationship with Catholicism gradually grew. I soon had an intellectual understanding of something I'd always felt. Along with math's - I shudder - and English, I learned that everyone has unique gifts, is special, and is loved by God. The gifts I possess were not nurtured by God alone, however, but also by an array of teachers and so forth who always encouraged my creative nature. One particular creative writing exercise resulted in my short story being shown to the principle for its merits - a moment that has stuck, and which I'm sure spurred some of my very recent achievements in writing.

My friends and I decided one day to start a chess club, which after some careful thought, the school wholly supported. A lunchtime rock band was next on our agenda, and once again our idea was permitted and guided by teachers. I don't recall a single instance of ridicule or discouragement from any member of staff.

My five years at St Bernard's felt like seven, in that I have so many fond memories. Christmas and Easter were always special times, celebrated with a unique Aussie flavour that I've never felt elsewhere. End of semester performances of songs like 'Christmas where the gum trees grow' are hard to forget! Above all, I'm grateful for the friendships between my friends' families and my own, many of which still exist today.

The change marked by high school meant I spent less time at St Bernard's, but whenever my family returned for Mass, we enjoyed the company of our larger, parish family.

Even today, when due to life's circumstances our visits become infrequent, there's always homely warmth upon our return. I know the St Bernard's community, whatever form it may take, will always be there for me and my family because it always has been. Its part of the spirit I carry inside me, which is everlasting. Through days of joy or tragedy, love and neglect, there's always been a warm place up the road, which glows unconditionally. What I realize now is that each of us is a luminous temple; each of us carries that warm, Christmassy glow.

By the way, I'm 26 and have used a wheelchair all my life. The community I've found myself in, however, barely seems to notice.

Thank goodness.

