

Jon & the Shattered Windscreenⁱ

When Ms Tay walked into my office, she was visibly upset. Earlier that morning, after parking her car close to the basketball court, she went about her teaching duties. When she got back to her car that evening, she found the windscreen smashed. Her first reaction of shock gave way to anger. Scrutinising the damage closely, she spotted a sheet of paper attached to the wiper with the following message:

“Dear Sir/Madam, I am sorry to have caused this damage to your car. I was playing basketball when this accident happened. Please call me at this number.”

Ms Tay called – and the boy on the other end identified himself, apologised and offered to pay for the cost of the repair.

I was intrigued by this story. Here was a student who could have quietly kept this unfortunate matter to himself. Instead he decided to come clean and take accountability for his actions. I decided to speak with him. Jon was at my door in no time. He looked nervous, wondering what music he was going to face in the Principal’s office. He apologised profusely and explained how the accident had happened. After I was fully convinced that it was indeed an accident, I asked Jon what had gone through his mind when he decided to leave the note for Ms Tay.

“Sir, I asked myself how the owner of the car would feel when he or she saw it in that condition. I felt it was not right or fair for me not to come forward. It would not be what I have been taught. I had to do the right thing because it was the right thing to do.”

I was moved by the clarity, simplicity and conviction of this 16-year old’s response. Jon was not grandstanding or playing to the gallery. He was simply stating what was in his mind and heart – directly and unambiguously. It did not matter to him that some friends may say he was silly to admit to something which he could have easily got away with. Or that since he didn’t know whose car it was, why even bother thinking about that person’s feelings...

I have reflected much on this incident and Jon’s response. What critical factors have led to this young person developing a *clear moral compass*? How was his *sense of empathy and responsibility* nurtured? Where did he find the *courage to act on his convictions*? What worked in Jon’s case that he came forward voluntarily – when to this day, no one has come forward to own up in a somewhat similar incident that occurred some time ago?

I wish I have definitive answers to these questions. But, listening to Jon speak, I sense a boy who has developed his own moral bearings from consistent signalling and modelling in his home and school and from his friends and faith. When he speaks of these parts of his life, I feel the strong contribution that the significant adults in each part have made to anchor his thinking, feeling, reasoning and acting on enduring moral values. This affirms the vital and complementary roles played by the home, school and community in the moral education and character formation of each child.

This incident has reiterated an important lesson for me – that our young ones – whether they are our children or students – do learn from us, the significant adults in their lives. Therefore, as parents or teachers, we must be persistent in modelling how positive values are lived in our daily lives. Sometimes this may appear a futile and even thankless effort. But then along comes a Jon, who in shattering a windscreen, inspires and encourages us with his courageous and principled response – and shows us yet again that our young are watching and learning from us.

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ⁱ The names used in this anecdote have been changed.