

Philip Dewe

Master, Distinguished Governors, Pro-Vice-Master, Graduates and Graduands, Guests, and Colleagues,

Dresden, 19 October 1845. Richard Wagner was a stressed-out 32-year-old musician premiering what became one of the greatest overtures in the history of modern opera: Tannhäuser. The music began. The horns drew out the first strain of the Pilgrims' chorus, gently luring the audience into a sacred space, where a flawed but noble hero earnestly seeks salvation. Suddenly, however, the audience was jarred out of their contemplative state by a violent, agitated interruption by the violins. At the time, some critics criticised Wagner for disrupting the tranquillity of the pilgrim's chorus. But Wagner was alluding to something else: what it means to live in the modern world, with its frantic pace, its restless anxieties, and (although this is not a word he would have used) its relentless stress.

Wagner – with his melancholia, insomnia, debilitating skin disease, and painful digestive problems, all triggered by stress – was writing in a period where many were anxious about the over-stimulation of people's nerves. As many of us today recognise, we are living in a world that seems so hurried, so tense: in short, we are too stressed.

This is just one of the reasons why we honour Professor Philip Dewe today. Because besides being Vice Master of Birkbeck since 2003, Professor of Organization Psychology, and midwife to our campus in Stratford East, he is also an expert on stress (and a fan of Wagner). Stress touches each and every one of us in this room.

The Health and Safety Executive tells us that there are over 428,000 cases of stress a year. It is responsible for 40 per cent of all work-related illnesses. The occupations with the highest levels of stress include our own: they are the health professionals (especially nurses), those in the caring personal services (especially welfare and housing associate professionals), and teaching and educational professionals.

Dewe has tackled this epidemic with characteristic verve. While insisting that stress is not the fault of the individual, he equally refuses to lay all the blame on organizations. Rather, stress emerges out of interactions between the two. Stress is relational. To make a difference, stress experts need to pay attention to issues of power, ethics, social theory, and philosophy. Dewe calls for a holistic response to stress, taking into account both the individual and the wider contextual-structural issues. We also cannot ignore the role of emotions in organizational life.

But his research has been even wider than this suggests. He has grappled with the position of women in managerial posts, business ethics, and questions of moral intensity. He has explored the work-lives of officials in unemployment benefit offices as well as in Abby Life. He is as curious about sausage makers at a Pork Pie factory as he is about clergymen distressed by their own questioning of faith. And (I have discovered) he cultivates a passion for sequential tree analyses (if you don't know what that is.... well, neither did I).

I like to think that Dewe was always destined for Birkbeck. A New Zealand by birth, he graduated with a Masters degree in Management and Administration from Victoria University in Wellington and then was awarded an MSc and PhD in

Organizational Psychology from the London School of Economic. After a stint in commerce in New Zealand, he was appointed Senior Research Officer in the Work Research Unit, Department of Employment here in the UK. In 1980, he returned to New Zealand, heading up the Department of Human Resource Management at Massey University. But in 2000, his life changed again when joined the Department of Organizational Psychology at Birkbeck. Within three years, he was also appointed Vice-Master.

His achievements in these posts cannot be summarised in these few minutes. True to his philosophy – he advocates “quiet reconstruction” – he has set about developing online provision, liaising with the Trade Unions, and chairing the Human Resources Policy and Strategy Committee.

For Birkbeck, his greatest achievement, though, has been the establishment of the campus in Stratford East. The decision to expand into Stratford occurred well before it was chosen as the Olympic site. It represented a commitment by the College to reach out to the area of London that had the lowest participation rate in Higher Education. In collaboration with the University of East London, Birkbeck sought to bring quality higher education to this region. Dewe is “Our Man in the East”. His enormous charm, notorious sensitivity, warmth and understanding of all sides, and negotiating skills have smoothed our passage. His presence opened doors. Before the Olympics, he was already involved in major regeneration projects and he continues to be active in its post-Olympic legacy. If you haven’t visited the campus, please do – it is simply gorgeous.

The fact that Dewe chose stress as his academic specialism is no coincidence. He has a love of humanity and a desire to alleviate our woes. People cannot – should not – be treated as “objects” he insists. He demands a “person centred” approach to human resources, especially in contexts where stress is chronic. Colleagues in his

department and College boast that he is “trustful, decent, honest – and transparently so”. As one of his colleagues told me, a “test of the character of a person with power is how they treat people without it” and Dewe speaks to everyone the same way. His enthusiasm is infectious. “His favourite word is ‘yes’”, I am told, a word he “says with such a positive inflection that makes it seem that there isn’t anything he would rather do than listen to my bumbling around some issue or other”. Tellingly, for an expert on stress-reduction, after speaking with Dewe (I was repeatedly told) “somehow there doesn’t seem to be a crisis any more”.

Everyone has an anecdote about Dewe, whether it is his gold-mining great grandfather, his love of the Netherlands (including Dutch delicacies such as tom pouce, bitterballen, and raw herring), or his hatred of whiskey and heavy rock (particularly Meatloaf). He is a keen marathon runner, even if his running style has been unkindly characterized as a “glorified shuffle”. We should also never forget that Dewe is a New Zealand, with a fondness of all that is Kiwi. I am sure that Dewe did what I did recently – that is, don an All Blacks t-shirt to celebrate the New Zealanders beating England, again.

In his old age, Wagner claimed that his aim was “To deliver mankind from the woes of life, and above all from the pressure of modern culture”. Or, as Wagner also said, he sought to overcome “the gloomy feeling of misery in the human spirit, and of human craving profoundly unsatisfied by the state”. These are Dewe’s aim as well. As he states time and again in his writings, “We have a moral responsibility to those whose lives we research”. He tells us that we need to relax – that leisure and companionate behaviours makes us better people as well as better workers. So, if I may be allowed a personal note: Philip, thanks to you, I won’t feel guilty if, after this ceremony, I plop myself down to enjoy a good novel.

But before I do: it is my great honour to welcome Professor Philip Dewe as a College Fellow. He has made huge contributions to Birkbeck's success. We have been extraordinarily fortunate to benefit from his research, vision, and energy over the years and for the numerous ways he has contributed to furthering Birkbeck's educational mission.

Na matou te honore ki te whiwhi i a koe, no reira tenei te mihi ki a koe.

We honour him and welcome him as a Fellow of Birkbeck.