




REMEMBERING KEN ROBINSON 1950 - 2020

I am sad to report that, as most of you will probably now know, on August 21st, ARC lost its great thought leader, Sir Ken Robinson.

Ken was a great friend and supporter of ARC and all we stand for. It's fair to say that ARC would not even exist were it not for him. When the idea of ARC was first forming and we decided we wanted it to include great thought leaders, I turned to Ken as one of the very first, and indisputably the best thought leader we could possibly have. If we were to recruit Ministers of State from all over the world to this unproven movement that had no big financial capital behind it, we would need stunning intellectual capital of respected thinkers and change makers who would stake their reputations on it and draw in members. Though Ken could command speaking fees on a par with former Presidents and Prime Ministers, he listened to what ARC would be about, carefully considered his position, and offered his support free of charge, in full knowledge that we had no money to pay for his contribution. "Accept in haste, repent at leisure", he decided.

A household name to practically every government leader worth their salt and every professional leader that exists, Ken's intellectual stature and stimulation gave our proposed movement for educational change driven by human rights both excitement and dignity. He stayed with us for all of our first five years and five summits, and fully intended to continue doing so in the future. His generosity in contributing his time and expertise to this kind of movement that he truly believed in was admirable.




In September, 2019, Ken presented one of his classic talks, as a 15 minute ARC talk, to assembled politicians, system leaders, and leaders of professional associations, for our 3rd International Summit in California. His talk was, in style, the epitome of all his presentations. It demonstrated intellectual mastery, personal warmth, disarming self-effacement, moments of surreal humor, and the precision timing of the very best comedian, or actor. In substance, Ken talked about parenting and the value of free play, especially down-in-the-dirt outdoor play. He gently but firmly warned his audience against the tyrannies of standardized testing, overanxious parenting, and excessive screen-time that inhibited children's growth, development and play. His high status audience was utterly spellbound.

Underpinning and expressing this argument was and is Sir Ken's own remarkable life story. He grew up in the "what you see is what you get" North of England. It was a large working class family through and through. His father became a quadriplegic after an industrial accident. One brother was a professional footballer. Another had jammed with the very early Beatles. But he himself was struck down by polio at the age of 4. Ken understood what social isolation and marginalization meant viscerally. Yet, as he sidled onto the stage with the aid of his stick, Ken, as always, expressed no bitterness or regret about his early ill fortune. Indeed, as he has repeatedly stressed, he regarded his polio as a gift that had propelled him into education, a career devoted to the arts, and a life of the mind.

Ken protected teachers against the very worst things in education: the top-down accountability, plagues of testing, standardization, and fear. He encouraged and inspired the extraordinary number of teachers who already know how to teach creatively and collaboratively but who have been prevented and discouraged from doing so. Teachers all across the world have been gaslighted by misguided system leaders into believing they are the sole source of the failure of children who are raised in poverty. Ken bore witness, in public, to their unnecessary suffering. He picked them back up, empowered, and emboldened them to do what they knew to be right. He advanced the causes of creativity, play and child development in an ordinary, accessible and inviting way that proved irresistible to millions.

All this was rooted in who Ken was and where he came from, that he never lost sight of. In early April, Ken invited me to zoom in for interview with him on education and coronavirus as he was seated in his home studio. It was really more like a conversation. For much of the time, Ken talked about his love for his family that raised him, the family that lived around him now, his childhood experience of social isolation, the school on the street where he grew up, and his undying loyalty to Everton Football Club, for whom his brother once played. Ken has lived the iconic lines of Rudyard Kipling's "If". He has truly walked among kings (and queens). But he never lost his common touch – treating everyone he met in more or less the same way.

Ken has been a great colleague and a special friend to a number of us here. Steve Munby, ARC's facilitator, writes



"I first knew Ken in the late 1980s when he was a Professor at Warwick University and he was already the best after-dinner speaker I had ever heard. What I didn't realise at the time was that he was also a seriously profound thinker on education and would go on to influence millions of educators around the world. In spite of his great fame in later years, he remained a man of compassion and genuine kindness". It is a very rare privilege to come across such a man in our own lifetime.

Pasi Sahlberg, a fellow ARC thought leader, pays another tribute:

"I met Sir Ken first time in his L.A. home about a decade ago to talk about the joint work that we were invited to do in Saskatchewan. I had read his writings and heard him speaking and was a bit uneasy to appear with a global Rock star like him. I was really surprised how humble and down to earth he was in that conversation. And that's what he has always been to me. He was able to communicate complex ideas in education in a way that anybody could understand. This is how he will be remembered: A giant of our time who will go down in the history of education as one of the great ones".

I have been privileged to know, connect, and interact with Ken over many years. But the thing that will stay with me for a very long time is something he did after the mass shooting in Christchurch, New Zealand, in March 2019. Just days after that tragedy, I was scheduled to give a workshop to local school principals, some of whom had families who had been impacted by this appalling event. I had worried a lot about what to say to them. I wanted to be empathetic but not mournful, somehow positive without projecting false cheer. So at very short notice, just a few days ahead of time, I tried to think of the biggest name in the field, whom they would admire and respect, and who would be able to comfort them somehow. The answer was Ken Robinson. Amid what has always been an extraordinarily busy schedule, he came through within 48 hours.

His short video was brilliant. It was compassionate, of course. But it was also so much more than that. He treated this extraordinary moment as a teachable one. "No-one is born to hate," he began. People learn how to hate. So what our schools must do instead, he continued, is show children how to love. And then he expanded on what that meant. This roomful of anguished school leaders was incredibly moved and also uplifted. Ken was their leader at that moment; the thought leader they needed him to be who came across with complete authenticity.

And that really is what it comes down to. I have been so proud to know Ken, as an intellectual, a thinker, a speaker, a writer, a doer, a colleague, and a friend. We will all miss him immensely. It is now our job in ARC to carry his ideas, influence and legacy forward and do our part to continue to change and improve the world for the better, for generations to come.

Andy Hargreaves
President and co-Founder of ARC
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