

## Headmaster's Prize Day Speech Friday - 3 July 2009

When people talk of the generation gap it is invariably a negative reference to an inability to communicate. "Why won't you listen to me?" is a phrase heard in most family households at some point. I'm sure you are all familiar with it and the accompanying sound of bedroom doors being slammed.

It occurs to me; however, that the very gap we all refer to is in fact a necessary part of our development as a society. Unpleasant as these exchanges can be, they are a signal of a comfortable family, where the younger members feel confident to express their views and opinions in a safe environment and in the knowledge that the love they have relied on throughout their early years will not be removed just because they argue.

A successful society will continue this process outside the confines of individual families. It will listen to its young people if it has any sense. They have the energy and enthusiasm with which to tackle the future. But a society must first be comfortable in its own integrity and believe sincerely that it has taught its children well and equipped them with the necessary knowledge and skills with which to form sound and true opinions. If that is the case, then we will be happy to accept their disagreements.

Delivering uncomfortable truths requires courage and commitment. The next generation must be tutored in that courage as many of the truths they must deliver may be unpalatable and may carry a heavy burden of culpability which we may not wish to hear. And yet they must be delivered and solutions must be found if we are to continue to develop.

Our students at Pocklington face many challenges when they leave school. Individual challenges which will force them to stretch themselves and hone their abilities tirelessly. Family challenges as they embark on their own roads of discovery into finding a life partner and founding the next generation. But above all, they inherit the flawed and precarious world created for them.

Recent events would seem to suggest that our much vaunted democracy has corrupted itself from within, leaving some politicians morally weakened and apparently self-seeking.

There is much work to be done as we begin to restore the true values of democracy and rebuild the transparent and honourable system of government to which we aspire. Our young people will need all the courage and integrity available to them as they undertake this task. And we must have the humility to listen to them, accept their criticisms and be advised.

Our world, so magnificent in its beauty and majesty is equally damaged by a lack of foresight. We must start to listen to our young scientists and environmentalists and act with commitment and good grace.

A lot of listening is needed and a lot of truths.

Integrity, therefore, becomes a vital ingredient and the primary responsibility of the next generation. Perhaps this is the hub of the problem known as the generation gap? In order to teach young people about integrity we must first be prepared to admit that, somewhere along the line, some people within our generation may well have lost their own.

Samuel Johnson once said:

*Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful.*

There are many heroes of integrity in our history and their stories should be told regularly. I choose as mine today, Sir Thomas More, Chancellor of England during the reign of Henry VIII. A close friend and ally of the king, a renowned lawyer and a loving family man, More was, above all else, a committed Christian. He was happy to serve his king in every possible way, but when asked to sign an oath he believed to be wrong, he could not bring himself to do it. He lost his head as a consequence, but he did so in the knowledge that to do otherwise would have rendered him unable to live with himself or look his family in the eye.

As he tries to explain his refusal to obey his king to his beloved daughter he uses these powerful words.

*When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water...and if he opens his fingers then....he needn't hope to find himself again.*

For More, failure to follow his own conscience meant crossing a line beyond which his integrity would be forever lost. Robert Bolt, author of 'A Man for all Seasons', explores the life of this giant among men and refers to his subject as 'a hero of selfhood'. I believe that he defined the very essence of integrity in this phrase. Selfhood means knowing the truth and knowing what will be lost if we sacrifice it.

Like More, Pocklingtonians require a sense of their own self and the courage and determination to preserve it against all encroachments of wealth, position or personal safety. That's asking a great deal, but essential.

I don't doubt the courage, energy or convictions of Pocklingtonians to take on this challenge. I am privileged to see those qualities in their raw form every day. I just hope that our generation has the courage to admit our mistakes and allow them the opportunity to repair the damage without restraint before it becomes too late.

I am aware that the tasks ahead, as I lay them out here, are daunting in the extreme. You are probably thinking, "Well, what on earth can we do about this? None of it is our fault and yet you give us the responsibility to put it all right. How?"

My answer is simple: keep doing what you do every day to the best of your ability and in the manner you know to be right.

You constantly impress and delight your teachers with your creativity and your passion. I have occasion to be proud of you in many ways:

The Hatfield Opera

Dido and Aeneas, Swing for your supper, the summer concert

The Art Exhibitions 'Re-mastered' at the Wolds Village,

Charity week – The Variety concert – Findlay Henderson and Billy Risso – Gill playing their song; Staff Salsa

Cadets: Josh Peterson, James Jackson, Sam Mortimer, Rob Honeyman – help y/day

Cricket Festival – winning all 3 fixtures vs. Strathallan, Caledonian Cricket Academy and Stewart’s Melville (*award trophy to Jo Green*)

Your intellect, wit and courage demonstrate daily the spirit of our school motto ‘*vertute et veritate*’ and you embody the integrity that underpins it. All I ask of you today is that you continue to conduct your lives in this way as you make your way in the world; that you remember to protect the truth in every decision you make; that you use your integrity to govern those decisions and that you never compromise that integrity. Like the fabric of our world, it is not a commodity which is renewable and, once lost, it cannot be reinvented.

**Theodore Roosevelt – 26<sup>th</sup> President of the United States wrote:**

*It is not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again because there is no effort without error and short-coming, who knows great devotion, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at the best knows in the end the high achievement of triumph and who at worst, if he fails while daring greatly, knows his place shall never be with those souls who know neither victory nor defeat.*

We will always face challenges both in our own lives and the communities within which we live. However I hope that each member of Pocklington will seek not to be the critic but the person in the arena who knows victory and may be defeat but above all else:

*To thine own self be true.*

To those of you who are leaving, on behalf of Pocklington, I wish you well and please keep in touch; and to those returning in September as the popular musical artist, Mr Alice Cooper wrote:

*‘Schools out for the summer’.*