

## HM Start of Term Assembly

8<sup>th</sup> January 2019

### ***Reasons to be Cheerful: Perspectives***

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Morning – welcome back. Good to see you. This place is very quiet without you. Nice to be back in school uniform, isn't it...? I expect, for most of us, it feels a bit odd to be up and conscious at this time of the morning. My smart shoes feel rather tight; the collar a bit constraining and it's strange to be wearing a tie again.

All this means, though, is that we have the exciting prospect, the unopened present, of a new term ahead of us.

I'd like to start by sharing a letter. Written by a girl, at boarding school, to her parents.

*Dear Mum and Dad*

*Please don't worry too much about what you might have heard about the fire at school. We're all fine. And it was quite exciting with all the fire engines and confusion.*

*I did break my leg jumping out of the second floor window but the school nurse was very nice and the hospital is so close by, it wasn't too painful walking there. They put a cast on after a few hours waiting and I'm fine now. The doctor said I should be back on games in a year or so.*

*My new boyfriend Jerry has been a great help. He's one of the hospital porters and is previously married with two tiny children who are just lovely. So cute. He's very keen to bring them down to meet the rest of our family before we make any further plans. I know you'll like him.*

*I'd better go now - my room-mate Sally has made some friends from outside of school and we're meeting them in the supermarket car park down the road. They sound really interesting.*

*I'll call soon - hope you're all well and the dog isn't missing me too much.*

*Lots of love.*

*Becky.*

*PS.*

*...*

*None of the above is true.*

*What is true is that I think I've lost that expensive new laptop you bought me.*

*I just wanted you to keep a sense of perspective.*

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I want to make 3 observations about perspective.

Perspective matters. This may mean keeping a sense of proportion. Everything matters, but some things matter more acutely, more permanently, than others. Some things are reversible, recoverable; others cannot be turned around.

The way we look at things is important, isn't it? Our world view. Like when you pan out on a google map: the specific details fall away and the broader shape of the land makes itself known. You have to zoom back in, of course, but panning out helps us get a sense of perspective.

So, thought number one at the start of this term: let's try to keep a sense of perspective. That doesn't mean that the details don't matter: they do. Everything is made up a combination of details. The most intricate machines break down if one small part isn't tuned and made right. In our daily lives, we need to care about every detail and ensure each aspect of what we do is done to the best of our ability and with care.

But.

Sometimes we need to take a step back and remember the big things that really matter. The big things. The values we show in what we do; the way we treat others; our longer-term aims and goals.

We might call this the 'Google map' view.

If, at times during this term, you get buried in your concerns; try panning up and out. Appreciate the landscape you are in. Look at everything from way up high. Count the blessings. Be grateful. And then, get back to the details.

2.

My second thought on perspective is about points of view. We all have a point of view. It comes from our experiences, our attitudes, the assumptions that are built into us by the way we grow up; the places we live. Many of these perspectives become unconscious. We default to them without knowing it. Sometimes, this needs checking. To a man with a hammer, everything begins to look like a nail.

So, we need to be willing to change our perspectives. To have our viewpoints critically examined – then be willing to challenge them ourselves. This is what we might call, keeping an open mind.

Again, there may be moments this term when each of us needs to be willing to re-think our position; take a new attitude; reflect and change our point of view.

The same things can look different depending on how, when and from whence we view them. A 6 is a 9 to the person on the other side of the desk. Both are right.

A white rhino is an overweight unicorn. It depends on how you choose to see it.

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So, when we look ahead, and when we look behind, we do so with an attitude of mind; a viewpoint. Looking back at the events of the recent holiday, and indeed to the highs and lows of the year that's just been and gone, I hope that you feel a mixture of satisfaction and desire to be better...

I made a new year's resolution this year. It was to avoid talking about new year's resolutions in the first assembly of term. But, it would be wrong not to note the sense of opportunity that a fresh calendar year presents. For those of us in education, January marks a second beginning. A point at which we can bank the first term's experience and look to new investments, with a deeper sense of purpose.

For many, the turn of the year can precipitate a curious compound of hope and despair. We look back at the year gone by and review the events of our own lives, as well as those of our family and friends, and the wider world. We might ask ourselves whether it has been a good year – for us, for our friends and family. We might ask whether the world got a little bit better during 2018. We might wonder whether it got a little bit worse. Are there good grounds for hope that we are always moving to a better, fairer, kinder global human community. Or, is there more persuasive evidence that the human-kind is becoming a more confused, desperate and disparate family.

How would we measure and quantify any answer to such a complex question; a question that can be answered from such a plethora of valid perspectives? Might it be that any assessment of the past, and indeed the future, comes down to our own individual temperament and outlook? How we choose to see the world.

Hope, allegedly, springs eternal. As an Arsenal Fan I can testify to this. It begs the question whether it is better to live life in hope – or to reconcile oneself to disappointment and then be pleasantly surprised when things turn out well. To my mind, it is not just desirable, but actually our duty, to live in hope. Hope is not a matter of outlook – a kind of wistful,

fingers-crossed, ignore the bad bits dreamland. Hope faces the hard realities of life and tries to address them. Hope is not wishful-thinking, it is a call to action.

But, how would a hopeful person answer this question: is the world a better place at the end of 2018 than it was at the start? We might start by citing all the many very real horrors, sadnesses, brutalities, disappointments, disasters and apparently chaotic turns of events. We would soon find that we have stacked up a powerful body of evidence to suggest that 2018 was a bad year, maybe even a mad year. And this might lend weight to the view that human civilisation is going in the wrong direction. I can see that. I would not try for one second to downplay the depth and breadth of suffering – some of it born of random chance, much of it carried out through human agency.

However, perhaps because I am a hopeful soul, I find myself looking back to the many good things that occurred. I find myself thinking of the countless kind and noble acts carried out by human beings; acts of compassion, generosity, friendship. These acts born of the same human free will that also proved capable of wickedness and depravity.

But, is my optimistic view justified? What evidence is there that the world got a bit better last year? A list, published by Future Crunch, offers 99 global reasons to celebrate progress made in 2018.

They include the following:

- For the first time since agriculture-based civilisation began 10,000 years ago, the majority of humankind is no longer poor or vulnerable to falling into poverty.
- In 2018, 120 million people gained access to electricity. That means that for the first time since electrical service was started (1882), less than a billion of the world's population are left in darkness
- Democracy is more widespread than ever. Six in ten of the world's countries are now democratic—a post war record.
- Young people in all countries are more optimistic than adults. Nine in 10 teenagers in Kenya, Mexico, China, Nigeria and India reported feeling positive about their future
- Global deaths from state based conflicts have declined for the third year in a row, and are now 32% lower than their peak in 2014.

There 94 other reasons to be cheerful in this list. The 99 positive facts suggest some progress is being made - or at least the putting right of wrongs. Many are, of course, the flip side of deep and long-running negatives – they show progress towards - rather than arrival at - a worthy and ideal destination. A destination at which each living being, and indeed the planet itself, is treated with respect and given the opportunity to thrive.

In 2019, we find ourselves 100 years on from the year in which the first female MP, Nancy Astor, took her place in the House of Commons; we are 50 years on from the day when mankind first stepped on the moon.

Despite these examples of progress, and many others, we reflect on the reality of the very many negative events of the past 12 months, there is the hard truth to face: that the world remains an intensely divided, brutal, imbalanced and unfair place.

We can:

- face this fact with despair;
- we can ignore this fact and immerse ourselves in comfortable self-interest;
- or we can pledge to do our bit.

There are, I believe - and not to sound trite - genuine reasons to be cheerful. Even with the uncertainties of this part of the world, we are incredibly blessed in this country; and how much more so in this unbelievable community we share. We should be feeling hopeful; excited. Rhinos should indeed look like unicorns. And we should be feeling a duty to spread hope. I would like to believe that the turn of the year is a moment of profound hope and opportunity. And, a time at which we can remind ourselves of the daily call to action - a call to action - that we can, in our individual lives and in our daily actions, make the world a better place. And, at the very least, live purposefully and appreciate the huge freedoms and opportunities we can all access. Let's make the most of it. And use our privileges not just to our own advantage but for the wider benefit of the world around us.

3. So, to summarise my third observation on perspective: living as we do in a very privileged part of the world, in our Salopian bubble, we need to force our vision wider to think, see and care globally. To be global citizens.

So:

1. Let's keep a healthy sense of perspective in our daily lives – immerse in the detail but keep lifting up to review the wider landscape.
2. Let's respect and learn from the perspectives of others
3. Let's think globally not just locally.

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In that spirit, let's turn our minds to the term ahead. The Lent Term is made of 11 weeks; a 6 week run before exeat and a five week run after it. Exams will be at the forefront of many of your minds. Particularly, the Fifth Form, who will have been revising over the Christmas break and move into their trial exams today; the Upper Sixth have trials to work towards just after exeat; and all of us, of course, need to work our way swiftly through the academic gears to make a crisp start to our academic learning this term. The Fasti is full, as ever, and

its pages provide an adrenalin-inducing road map of challenges, opportunities, communal events and activities. Get stuck in!

One of the events I'm looking forward to, on your behalf, is the Pupil Symposium that we have scheduled at the end of this month. You'll find out more about this closer to the time, but essentially, it's major opportunity for us to find out what you want to improve in the school and what you think we need to work on in the next few years. Your views will be fed, along with those of your parents, into the process to create the school's development plan for how we improve the campus and facilities, the curriculum, pastoral care and the wider programme of activities, sport, music, drama. Everything. More about this event in due course. But, you can get thinking in the odd idle moment between now and then.

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We welcome Mr Rhodri Evans to the Geography Department and Mrs Schmaller-Russell is back with us after maternity leave, teaching German. We also have 2 new Third Form pupils with us, bringing the total number of pupils in the school to a nice round 790. There's a lot of you – but I truly believe that every person in this room has a contribution to make and should feel valued and important.

As ever, if you have any concerns, there are plenty of people to turn to – within the house and beyond it; staff and fellow pupils.

I'll keep my new year's resolution and not mention new year's resolutions. Just hopes for you all this term; this new year. I hope you work sincerely; play with enthusiasm; enjoy each other's company; look after one another; and do something good for someone else each day. And keep a healthy sense of the big picture. I'll try to do those things too.

Have a great term.

LW

8 January 2019