

Headmaster's Speech Day Address, 29th June 2019

On a recent train journey back to our lovely corner of Shropshire, I was skim-reading the letters section of a newspaper, when I read this one from a gentleman in the village of Coneythorpe, in North Yorkshire:

Sir – I was assisting my 17-year-old daughter with her [A Level] revision when she received a text from Mum, which read: “What do you want from life?” This was an unexpected and profound question for an exam-sitting teenager. We debated various answers – wealth, fulfilment, love – all three.

Five minutes later, she received a second message from Mum. “Sorry. Typo. I meant: “What do you want from Lidl?”.

Now, that's a much more immediate question for an exam-sitting 17-year-old to tackle... Morale-boosting comfort food was presumably the order of the day. But, what of that first, accidental question? “What do you want from life?”

However well-equipped we all aim to be, no-one quite knows exactly what we'll need for life's journey – and exactly when we'll need it. What will be the crucial bit of learning; the key attributes; the critical qualification; the essential skills? How can we 'future-proof' our children? How do we make an education last a lifetime?

This is a challenge that parents and schools meet together. Our belief is that a Shrewsbury Education should last a lifetime. Ours is a whole person, fully-integrated model of learning that develops the mind and the body; the heart and the soul. The aim is to cultivate learning in all spheres: academic, co-curricular, pastoral, reflective, in- house and in the wider community.

An education that grows self-belief and direction; an education that helps to answer the 'biggy': what do you want from life?

At the start of this year, I outlined some of my aims as 28th Headmaster of Shrewsbury. I made five public promises:

1. To be present and visible within the school and know the pupils.
2. To communicate a clear sense of direction.
3. To create opportunities and expand our sense of possibility.
4. To trust, encourage and motivate our staff.
5. To extend our vision, deepening our commitment to the local community and the wider world.

I hope very much to deliver on those promises – and to add more. The parent research we carried out in the Michaelmas Term gave us very clear and positive feedback about the things parents expect from the School; and where you want us to apply our energy in the future.

This feedback has been influential in shaping the draft strategic plan that I will present to the Governing Body in September.

Parents and schools have the same mission at heart: we nurture, develop and celebrate the individual characters of the youngsters in our care. So: what is the character of a Salopian? Of course, there is no single type – they are unique individuals. However, there are some hallmark qualities. It seems to me that:

- Salopians are comfortable in their skins; they are celebrated for being themselves; they're good with people.
- Salopians are confident but not arrogant; they are honest but not righteous; they are gentle but not feeble; they are principled but not strident.
- Salopians learn to know their minds; and they are not afraid to speak truth to power.
- Salopians are omnivores; rounded creatures, they participate widely, and willingly.

What makes Shrewsbury School distinctive, I believe, is its ability to contain multitudes; to hold and celebrate contradictions. We are tribal, community animals with a deep sense of belonging; but we also want to be known and valued as individuals with freedom of spirit. We value tradition but we don't like pomposity. We are respectful and polite, but we live with an impish spirit and meet life with a twinkle in the eye. We are ambitious, but not 'elbowy'; we are purposeful but not rushed – Salopians are never knowingly over-paced! We belong to a community that has heritage and yet is in touch with the modern world.

Our children will need to be highly adaptive in their professional lives. We recognise that careers advice and guidance must be shaped to fit the future not the present. For this reason, we have created the new role of Head of Futures. Our aim is to deliver world class guidance, networking and careers coaching.

Ours a community that is used to achieving the remarkable. This year our pupils have secured ten Oxbridge offers. The most popular university destinations are Exeter and Durham; we have pupils heading to destinations as diverse as Yale, UCLA, Pasadena, Lausanne and Sydney. Other Salopians are heading straight into professional training to become chefs, helicopter pilots and hoteliers; others to pursue careers in professional sport and music.

It is not in the Salopian spirit to be boastful, but there have been some notable moments this year.

As the home of the world's oldest running club, the Hunt, we were honoured this year to pick up a prestigious heritage award from Lord Coe at the World Cross-Country Championships in Denmark. This unique exposure on the global sporting stage was thanks to the remarkable initiative of our Deputy Head Co-Curricular, Mr Middleton. Huntsman Charlie Ockleston did us all proud as he started the U20 Men's race with the traditional rallying cry and bugle call, "*Run hard, run well*".

At the same time back at basecamp, we were hosting the Eton Fives National Championships and came out with a record haul of four national titles, for both senior girls and boys, mixed

and junior boys. The boys' first pair triumphed over Eton A in a four-hour epic in front of a record crowd.

Our senior girls' quadruple sculls came away with a landmark silver medal at the National Schools' Regatta. This was a first national honour for Shrewsbury girls' rowing; we have high hopes for our crews at Henley next week.

We won the Scottish Islands Peaks Race at the first attempt. Our Marines section brought home national honours in winning the Sir Stuart Pringle Trophy. Numerous squads have qualified for regional and national honours in sports as diverse as cricket, rowing, fencing, basketball, lacrosse, football, athletics, cross-country and hockey, to name a few. Following our first ever co-educational cricket tour which went to South Africa, our girls' 1st XI came runners-up in the National Finals on Thursday, and Lower Sixth Former Issy Wong is in the England Women's Squad facing Australia today.

The creative life of the School, such a central part of our identity, won national recognition this year. Our drama team have delivered a host of productions from *Jesus Christ Superstar* to *Under Milk Wood* and *A Matter of Life and Death*. The Art Faculty is buzzing. Music-making has been as diverse as ever; last night's Gala Concert was a fitting finale.

This is just a tiny glimpse of the many accomplishments of our pupils this year, guided and inspired by the staff.

A central part of my job is to surround your children with amazing people. The teaching and support staff alike need to radiate energy, colour, commitment and care. The photo on the reverse of your Speech Day programme was taken in August. The Shrewsbury Staff family photo! It gives a sense of the vibrancy and sheer number of colleagues who work together to look after and inspire your children.

Two weeks ago, we celebrated 19 colleagues from the teaching and support staff who have served the School for over 25 years. This place certainly inspires loyalty.

We have a number of staff who leave today with our warm wishes and thanks. Rhodri Burke retires after 30 years teaching Physics; Dympna Nightingale has been on the staff for 29 years teaching Music and Careers Adviser; Dr Christine Samworth signs off after 19 years in the Chemistry Department. We also say farewell to our phenomenally talented Assistant Director of Music, Alex Mason, who becomes Director of Music at Lancing College; and Tom Corbett who heads off to Harrow Shanghai as Deputy Head Co-Curricular.

To all leaving colleagues – thank you, farewell and keep in touch.

Three colleagues are stepping down after a combined total of 23 years leading boarding houses. Dan Nicholas takes on a key role in prep school liaison; Marcus Johnson will play a significant role in the pastoral leadership of the School; and Naomi Pritchard becomes an Admissions Tutor. We thank them warmly for their outstanding commitment to the boarding life of the School.

I would like to thank all the parents in this space for trusting us with the care of your children and believing in a Shrewsbury education. Thank you to the Shrewsbury School Parents' Association, and its dynamic Chairman Will Stratton-Morris, who retires from the role today.

My very grateful thanks to the Chairman of the Governing Body, and to the Vice-Chair and all our Governors for their expert guidance. Thanks to all our staff – teaching and support – for their dedication and care. In addition, I add my deep appreciation and gratitude for the warm welcome that Jules, our children and I have received this first year.

As a family, we have loved settling in Shropshire. At Easter, we were in an airport and got talking to a lady who gradually worked out that I was a teacher. “Where do you teach?” “In Shropshire,” I said. “You don’t know Shrewsbury School, do you?” she asked. “Well, yes, I do – I’m the new Headmaster there, as it happens.” “I had a son there,” she revealed, adding wistfully, “He’s 40 now.” “You don’t look old enough,” I said, somewhat smarmily. Then I ventured a question: “How many stars would you give a Shrewsbury education? She gave me a long look. “It’s a bit early to tell...”

Ah, so true. The fruits of a great education are to be judged over a lifetime. The tender age of 40 is far too early to tell! Surely, and most immediately, we want each individual pupil to get the best possible examination results – their own personal best. But we all know, that it is not league table position that motivates or governs us at Shrewsbury. In a truly great school, we rejoice about each of the individual leaps made by each and every child. We pursue whole-person education. After all, that is what any caring parent would want for their child.

At a time when public life all too often seems like a second-rate pantomime; and in a world where international relations are apparently dominated by a motley cast of egomaniacs and over-grown babies; what we need is a positive wave of young leaders who do things for the right reasons.

What the world needs is young leaders of character. People who have the principles and values to guide their talents and energies. People who believe in the survival of the kindest.

It is the cultivation of values and virtues that is the true and life-long purpose of education. The virtues and values that illuminate our youngsters must be bright enough to guide them on life-paths that are not simply about self-satisfaction and the amassing of riches and experiences. Life-paths that are mapped out confidently; and pursued with purpose and kindness.

And so, we return to the question posed by our mis-texting mother from Coneythorpe, North Yorkshire. A question as simple as it is mysterious.

‘What do you want from life?’

Today, as our Upper Sixth leavers become Old Salopians, they set out to find their answers. As they do, I hope that they travel through life with relentless cheerfulness; and with the motto of their old school etched in their hearts: “If right within, trouble not”.

Thank you all. Floreat Salopia!