

**Pretoria Boys High School Old Boys Association**  
**1968 Form Fives 50<sup>th</sup> Reunion – 21 September 2018**  
**School Assembly Address**  
Derek Swemmer

Headmaster, the school leaving group of 1968, members of staff and gentlemen.

The 50<sup>th</sup> reunion is an opportunity to remember the good old days, and at this school there were many of them! It is also a particular pleasure to have the school-leaving group of 2018 join us on this occasion – their last assembly. For many of us it seems but yesterday that we were in your shoes and in the school assembly.

The Class of 1968 is privileged indeed to be able to return to our School, a School that made it possible for us, both individually and collectively, to impact both inside and outside of South Africa. We have members who have travelled in from the four corners of the country, one flew in from Vancouver in Canada, another from London, and there were many others who would have wished to have been here, but cannot be.

When thinking about the impact and the nature of our time at PBHS, I was reminded of two quotations which speak to the nature of the experience we had at The School.

In 2010 Eric Schmidt, CEO of Google said:

***“Every two days now, we create as much information as we did from the dawn of civilisation until 2003.”***

Think of the enormity of what he was saying. Every year all of that known information is increased 182 times! And, he said this some 15 years ago. By the end of this year 2018, that represents 2737 times as much information as was available in 2003! But he added:

***“The real issue is that - this is user-generated content.”***

The impact of this on all of our lives is phenomenal. We are overwhelmed by the stretch of the social media and the perpetual intrusion into our daily lives of the thoughts of others, rather than our own profound reflections.

My second quote is a statement made by an extraordinarily wise man, Albert Einstein, who said:

***“Education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned in school.”***

As we in the class of 1968 have interacted, the logic of this quote became profound. Our reminiscences are about the Masters and the few Ladies, who had the doubtful joy of teaching us. We remember their mannerisms, their eccentricities and the very essence of their beings. Most of us remember little if anything of what they taught, but they educated us.

From the age of 16 I have been a subscriber to Time magazine, which always gave me another perspective on the events of the world, other than those rather jaundiced views presented to us by the then people in power. The magazine that they presented to us at the turn of the millennium in the year 2000, is one that sticks in my memory.

The last day of 1999 was perceived to herald a watershed year because of the impact of binary computer programming. The reality was that for some five years before the deadline, computer programmers around the world scrambled to avoid the risk of chaos when the new millennium dawned on 1 January 2000, rewriting the strings of code needed. By that date the religious cult era had already taken hold in South Africa and many of the so-called prophets, that lead them, were predicting the end of the world. In the end the new millennium began almost without a ripple.

Into that receptive climate Time magazine published a special edition. It looked at the various career options available then to school-leavers. It predicted that those entering the job-market would, in their lifetime work in as many as between 5 and 9 different careers, and that half of the careers that they would follow had not yet then been invented! The one career that stands out in my memory is that the most important “yet to be created career” would be that of the Pharma (spelt P-H-A-R-M-A). The futurists then were predicting that the world would no longer be able to feed the populations of the world. Sustenance they predicted would come in the form of pills, tablets, and other products developed by pharmacologists. There are today rows of shelves in almost every supermarket and pharmacy offering such products.

Today learners at school, almost without exception, were born in this millennium and accept this growing work of the Pharmas as reality. New futurists now predict that school leavers will be exposed to between 11 and 15 different careers, and 70 to 80% of those jobs have yet to be invented. So the education we receive while at school needs to equip us for constant change. Judging from the change we have witnessed at Boys High I am convinced that all of you are in good hands.

With each passing day startling new finds are occurring. Early this year neuroscientists discovered that an enzyme previously thought to have no purpose in the brain is in fact a critical component in the processes of sleep. As we resurface from cycles of deep sleep, the enzyme is busy ‘washing’ the brain by removing the thousands upon thousands of daily stimuli that we have absorbed. We need to go through three such cycles per night in order to cleanse our brain for the day ahead. Given the growing flood of information available to us this enzyme has become extremely important.

Imagine the sense of fulfilment that the researchers had when they established the purpose of the enzyme. In our careers we all seek to attain fulfilment. A small number of us while still at school are convinced that we know what our career path will be. I would like to ask the audience to raise their hands if they count themselves among this lucky small number. My guess is that fewer than 5 to 10% of you raised a hand. For rest of us the sense of fulfilment may have to be found outside of our work.

It is most profound when fulfilment comes from helping others.

In my life I have worked and benefited from exposure to organisations such as the Scouts, Rotary International, Golden Key International Honour Society (open worldwide to the top 15% of students studying degree programmes in higher education), and now through my work at FEDSAS through our advocacy for the expansion of value-driven public schools. These organisations have given me extraordinary opportunities to achieve a sense of deep fulfilment, beyond that traditionally found through one’s work.

If you find, in future, little fulfilment in your work remember to give in order to receive; make service a beacon of your behaviour; work in charity organisations, perhaps ones like Hospice or the SPCA.

People who espouse such values are desperately needed in South Africa, with our sadly fractured society. Our cities are designed in a manner unlike those of any other nation in the world. I am now temporarily resident in Botswana and every suburb has, living cheek by jowl, people from the full range of economic strata. Sadly our South African cities have the lowest economic classes forced to the outskirts of our cities, furthest away from their work, and far from their parents and families.

In the 70s and the 80s of the previous century I found myself running workshops on prejudice at schools across the Witwatersrand. The workshops focused on the extent to which we are inclined to pre-judge other people without having access to the facts about them. A cornerstone of the presentation was the documentary film entitled "A Class Divided".

When the headmaster shared with us momentous events from the year 1968, one that he mentioned was the assassination of Dr Martin Luther King. Few people know that his father was also murdered – he was stabbed to death in the Atlanta pulpit of the church in which his own son had also come to serve. Theirs were senseless deaths indeed.

One teacher, Jane Elliott, in the small rural village of Riceville in Iowa was confronted the morning after King's death with queries to her about the tragedy. "Why'd they kill the King ma'am?", "Who is this King ma'am?" and "What's this mean for us ma'am?" In her words she knew she had to do something out of the ordinary.

She divided the class according to hair and eye colour. Scarves were put around the necks of those inferior children with blue eyes and blonde hair, put there by the dark-haired, brown-eyed children. For the rest of the day those in the first group experienced the most dismal day of their lives. Some did not want to come back the next day. When they returned the teacher told them she had made an error the day before, the reverse was true. Blonde-haired and blue-eyed young people were special, and dark-haired, brown-eyed people could not be trusted and were unworthy of being treated fairly. Their day was as miserable for them, as it had been for the other group, the day before.

Thus began a new career for her as a change-agent in the conventional Conservative state into which she had been born, had worked and lived her life. She found her programme expanding into reformatories, into prisons, into other schools, into youth organisations and churches across the state, and indeed the nation. In all of these places, she ended these profoundly moving experiences for the participants by quoting from a famous proverb of the original people of the United States.

I will end my address with her words which are deeply important for every South African:

***"Let me not judge another, until I have walked for a full day in her moccasins!"***