

PRETORIA BOYS HIGH SCHOOL

ADDRESS BY TINY BARNETSON TO THE SCHOOL ON THE OCCASION OF THE 60TH REUNION OF THE CLASS OF 1959

Many of you will have been giving considerable thought to the careers you wish to pursue once you leave this school. Given the quality of education you receive here, and your ability to access information on the internet, I am sure that if I asked you the question "What is the single most important of all occupations?", I would get some well reasoned answers.

These are likely to include such professions as medicine, nursing, genetics, engineering, IT specialists and the like.

If you were to ask the same question of me, my answer would be unquestionably that the most important of all is the profession of teaching, in particular at primary and secondary level. It is under the guidance of these professionals that such important foundations for the success of your future careers are being laid.

And yet, despite its critical importance, the profession of teaching is not accorded the recognition that it so thoroughly deserves. I have often pondered the reason and allow me to give you my analysis.

When we were boys at this school, we had, as you have, a wonderful body of men and women, well qualified and dedicated to the task at hand. But one had the feeling that they were rather inhibited by rigid curricula which they repeated year after year with little change. What distinguished one teacher from another was the quality of delivery and the extent to which they supplemented their lectures with added items of interest.

They had their frustrations. Can you imagine what induced a teacher to write on a boy's report, "If ignorance is bliss, this young man is likely to experience a lifetime of undiluted happiness".

They also had extra curricula responsibilities, but, I suppose, it was seen to be a risk free predictable profession, with little requirement for change and enjoying attractive hours and holidays. If one were to apply the old economic maxim of risk and reward, teachers' rewards were structured accordingly. In retrospect this assessment was unfair.

Does this situation still prevail? Most certainly not.

With the invention of the micro chip and its impact on technology, virtually all professions have had to re-invent themselves, not the least of which has been the teaching profession.

In the 1980's a statistic was bandied about to the effect that from year dot to 1960, man's accumulated knowledge was "X". In the 20 years that followed, man's knowledge had doubled to "2X". Continuing it on that growth curve, one can hardly imagine the extent of human knowledge today.

This has of course impacted on the teaching profession. Subjects are growing in content and complexity and teachers have to continually devise means of how to capture appropriate material without leaving students behind.

The standard forms of delivery, that we experienced, have changed, which has required teachers to become well versed in technological presentation. These changes are ongoing and require great effort to ensure that content and delivery meet modern requirements.

The extra curricula activities of old, which generally involved sport and a couple of clubs, have expanded in number and in range, and require a far larger slice of a teacher's time than they did in the past, and more and more time is needed in attending to the administrative requirements of teaching.

It has thus become a dynamic and ever changing profession requiring enormous dedication to achieve the levels of excellence required and huge responsibility lies on the shoulders of these professionals as they fulfil their critical function of educating the youth of our country. It can in no way be described as a risk free profession.

And what of the role of the head, in our case a headmaster. Time does not allow for a full analysis of his role, but suffice it to say that I cannot conceive of a CEO or MD of any major corporation in this country who is required to be closer to his market, have a broader range of skills and carry a wider range of responsibilities as a head of a school such as this.

And there is a new and significant entry into the equation.

Economies travel in cycles which are generally of relatively short duration. However, in a period from about 1998 to 2008 there was a prolonged economic upturn during which time, and fuelled by the impact of hi tech stocks, enormous wealth was created. It was relatively easy to make money. You only needed to be invested in the stock exchange and own property. Stockbrokers and financial advisers started to believe that they were not only geniuses but were infallible, and people who had not experienced wealth before found themselves extremely wealthy.

Business executives who had not capitalised on the opportunity and, seemingly influenced by the new found wealth of friends and acquaintances, started considering their personal capabilities warranted financial rewards far higher than they were actually worth, and we saw the birth of outrageous financial packages, exacerbating the wealth gap and causing huge resentment.

Let me make one thing perfectly clear. I do not begrudge an entrepreneur a single cent that he or she has made. They have after all conceived of an idea, worked exceptionally hard to develop and promote the product, risked their own capital, experienced many of what Clem Sunter referred to as the "Dark night of the entrepreneur" and, most importantly, created employment.

But I have the greatest disdain for those employed by large organisations that they never created, fulfilling bureaucratic functions, and, being in positions of influence, rewarding themselves excessively without having ever risked their own capital. To add to the aggravation their rewards seem to continue even when they fail.

You may ask "What has this to do with education?".

It seems to have bred a new category of parent who, having tasted wealth and the power that goes with it, assume that all problems can be solved with money. They seem to believe that they can outsource the raising of their children to schools, and if the results are not what they want, then resorting to legal means to achieve their desired result.

They are inclined to lavish their children with all of the latest technological and sporting equipment and designer social occasion clothing, leaving the teachers to deal with the psychological distress of children whose parents cannot afford to compete.

Whilst not great in numbers, these parents tend to be influential, demanding, aggressive and arrogant, and we have seen cases of parents taking teachers and schools to court after punishment has been imposed on an errant schoolchild which punishment would, in the normal course, have been deemed perfectly acceptable.

Teachers are not trained to be, nor do they expect to render their services under threat of litigation, and it is not in any of our interests for them to have to operate in such climates. But it does add to the pressures of the profession.

And so we can be extremely grateful that, with all of the pressures on them, the profession has continued to attract teachers of the calibre that we have here, every one of whom could have chosen another, and perhaps more lucrative occupation, but who have clearly understood the vital role they are playing and have responded to the call. They are far more important to us than any of the other professions. They are, indeed, the cause of the other professions' success.

In closing then, I have three requests.

Firstly, as you find yourselves moving into positions of influence, which you undoubtedly will, use that influence to elevate the recognition of the importance of the teaching profession at every possible opportunity and ensure that teachers receive their just rewards. We simply cannot allow quality education to falter.

Secondly, as you re enter these portals with your offspring in tow, or those of other schools they may attend, understand that the teacher cannot achieve his or her objectives without the full and active support of the parents, or those standing in loco parentis, and that the raising of children cannot be outsourced to the teacher and the school.

And finally, for the remainder of your time here, cherish those extraordinary men and women sitting in various parts of this hall who are sacrificing so much to ensure that you are given the best possible foundations on which to build your futures. Reward them in the manner that means so much to them by performing at the highest level of your abilities in everything that you tackle.

In this way you will ensure their continuing motivation which is so vital to the perpetuation of pockets of excellence of which this school is such a shining example and which are, in turn, so vital to the future of this country and, indeed, the world.

We, the class of 1959, wish you well on the journey that lies ahead of you, and request you to remember at all times, from whence you came.