

50 YEARS ON – CLASS OF 1996

TOAST TO THE SCHOOL – 10 SEPTEMBER 2016 – PETER FARRANT

What an extraordinary occasion this is!

If anyone had asked me 50 years ago – what the odds were that we would be meeting together in this way – I would have given very very long odds! - But here we are – and where has the time gone -! –“Like an evening gone”!

I could stand here and spend the whole time reminiscing about the experiences and the fun, laughter, joys and trials of PBHS between 1962 – 1966. It is tempting to do so because a weekend like this fills one with great nostalgia and the memories come flashing back.

Leadership is about influence. Everyone influences someone. Therefore, in a sense, everyone is a leader. Sociologists tell us that even the most introverted individual will influence 10,000 other people in their life time.

As I look back on my life, I have been influenced by so many people – my parents, my teachers, friends, family.

As the African proverb puts it, “if you think you’re too small to make a difference, you haven’t spent the night with a mosquito!”

The mosquito makes a difference in an annoying way, but the principle is the same.

One person can stop a great injustice.
One person can be a voice for truth.
One person’s kindness can save a life.
EACH PERSON MATTERS.

This principle that each person matters is so central to life and to our approach. It is what I was taught at this school.

In the 1960’s there were about 1,000 boys at this school.

I was one – and you too were one of them. It was easy to hide – and I did try to hide – but the influence of kindness, generosity and love found me out – that influence came from my friends and colleagues – many of you are here tonight, from my teachers and of course from my family.

I well recall a pivotal moment in my life – which happened here at school – early on in my first year at Rissik House –

I was discussing my experience of an interview at a very progressive school in Johannesburg for which my parents had applied on my behalf. In the midst of the deep darkness of Apartheid – Verwoerdian apartheid of the 1960’s – this school was determinedly admitting black pupils. I said to Mr Mulvenna, one of my house masters, “Sir, I even saw black boys swimming in the school swimming pool with white boys!”

Mr Mulvenna’s reply: “Well Peter, that is interesting: What do you think is wrong with that?”

That encounter with Charlie Mulvenna's wisdom changed by entire political way of thinking. It sat me on a course which I still follow today!

Oprah Winfrey says: "Follow your instincts – That is where true wisdom manifests itself". In other words, like so many in the world, she believes that wisdom comes from within and that it is a kind of intuition.

Since we are all created in the image of God, that is a Biblical teaching and I believe it since I hold a Biblical world view, there is some truth in that.

However, the Bible teaches that wisdom comes ultimately from God and it is supremely acquired through our relationship with Him.

KNOWLEDGE IS HORIZONTAL.

WISDOM IS VERTICLE. It all comes down from above. We gain and grow in wisdom as we learn, reflect and live in relationship with God.

It is of course a process – and one which starts when life starts, is nurtured in the family and developed at schools and at universities and in the great university of life.

This kind of wisdom has been defined as sanctified common sense.

- the Art of Steering,
- practical knowledge of the laws of life and of the world based on experience,
- a parent's legacy to children,
- the quest for self-understanding a process begun as I say in the family, and nurtured and encouraged in great institutions of learning such as this great school.

At this school, knowledge was impacted to us horizontally!

I shall never forget Burrige Spies, Stuart (Drip) Hendry, Terry Ashton, Willie Brooks, Snake Hofmeyer, Noel (Polly) Pollock, Ma Smith (who would warm your ear for you laddie because you have nie done y're homework), Norris Cheadle, Bob Fair, Charlie Mulvenna, Tim Hill, Keith Gibbs, Walter Battiss, Larry Scully, Prof Bonn, Hugo Ackermann to mention some – of course, supremely, Desmond Abernethy that great Headmaster of this extraordinary school whose wisdom was constantly available to us all – whether we asked for it or not!

These teachers gave generously of themselves – most teachers at this school gave – and I can see from my walk about yesterday – STILL GIVE of themselves generously. This ability to give so generously of themselves is a fundamentally gift from God, who Himself is supremely generous.

Do you know that there are 25,000 variations of Orchid?

The orchid is just one of 270,000 species of flowers.

In our galaxy there are 300,000 million stars like our sun.

Our galaxy is one of 100,000 million galaxies!

God is extraordinarily generous.....

Our teachers were and are extraordinarily generous.

The Nobel Prize winner and most important Russian literary artist of the second half of the twentieth century, Alexandre Solzenitsyn (1918 – 2008) was imprisoned for 8 years for criticising Stalin, wrote: “The line separating good and evil passes, not through states, nor through classes, nor between political parties but right through every human heart – and through ALL human hearts.”

As I have already said, the Bible teaches us and I believe that, we are all created in the image of God. Human beings are capable of acts of great love, courage and heroism.

The responsibility of inculcating this vertically acquired wisdom and horizontally acquired knowledge lies:

FIRSTLY with the family (parents, grandparents and wider family)

THEN with community – churches and community in general

THEN with schools and places of learning.....

What I and you experienced at PBHS 50+ years ago was extraordinary generosity from our teachers: Servant leadership was and still is demonstrated in an amazing way – whether it be in the classroom, at PE lessons, on the sports fields – we were exposed to generous teaching, guidance, sharing of knowledge and to examples of life demonstrated by our teachers and mentors. Vertically acquired wisdom was constantly demonstrated and shown through tough and difficult life lessons, but also through loving kindness.....

All this, for me, and I am sure for you was foundational stuff for the rest of life to build on.

What I saw yesterday during our visit to the school was that this vitally important aspect of education has NOT changed at all at PBHS. In fact, if anything, it has expanded and improved. I experienced a sense of confidence in the boys with whom I spoke and I experienced a sense of calmness, accountability and truthful endeavour. I experienced in the boys a sense of respect and politeness which I have seldom seen elsewhere and which is sorely lacking in our world.

As we have and are celebrating 50 years on let us look to the future a future filled with the foreboding of climate change, political uncertainty and challenges of all sorts. Not least nuclear war!

We had the same challenges – or even worse – in the 60's.

This school, and our families, prepared us to face these challenges.

Mr Reeler and his staff are preparing the current boys at this school – and from what I can see, you are doing a magnificent job! Thank you!

St Augustine wrote that God was the master whom to serve is perfect freedom.

Before proposing the toast to this great school, may I ask you now all to rise and let's all pray together the school prayer – which I noted yesterday is still prayed every Friday at the assembly –

We prayed this prayer every Friday from 1962 – 1966 during term time –

So please join me – you will find the prayer printed on the back of the bookmark which I hope each of you has found at your table setting:

Make sure your glasses are filled. I give you PBHS – We wish it health, favour and blessing.