

Speech Day Address

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“ Your Grace, Headmaster, Chairman and members of council, ladies and gentlemen, hello.

My invitation to speak here is an honour I deeply appreciate.

There are at least two consequences of my climbing activities that are in some respects unfortunate.

One is that I've become a symbol of achievement to others and am given a cloak of respectability that is more decorous than deserved. With respectability comes responsibility and though my inclination compels me to wear that as best I can, it brings me to the next, perhaps unfortunate consequence: I get asked to stand in places such as this where the weight of my predecessors, invariably so much more eminent than I, bears heavily on my slightness.

If I have anything important to say, and you must be the judge of that, it has been mostly said before. I stand on the shoulders of people far greater than me but I'm sure that deep within us all, for the most part hidden, lies the wisdom of the prophets, the courage of Joan of Arc and the sensitivity of Blake. For all these people, even Jesus, were people who breathed the same air as we do, who walked and ate and slept as we do. Truth has never suffered from repetition, and if we know all this and keep it close to our hearts we are cunningly armed to have a better chance of living life to its fullest.

An occasion such as this, the ceremonial end of the school year, ought above all, to inspire those for whom the school exists—its students. It's sometimes all too easy to forget a school's main purpose. Of course parents must be satisfied that the school is doing the job well but parents are to be reminded that the school, especially a church school, has a greater duty than parent satisfaction. That duty is to the boys and girls and through them, society.

But how am I to inspire you?

Certainly I can urge you to follow your dreams and to always try your utmost at whatever you take on, but I cannot ignore deeper issues which I feel are especially the duty of the young to confront.

I've often heard myself described as 'only a mountaineer' but despite the apparent frivolity of the passion I have for climbing and more generally being in the bush, there are aspects of the experience which are worthwhile sharing. In fact if there was nothing to be learnt from the kinds of things I'm well known for, Timbertop could not be as effective as it is.

Timbertop gave me the chance to have a deeper appreciation of the natural world by keeping alive my childhood enthusiasm for it.

I'd grown up on a farm in Africa and then in the north-east of Victoria.

I can't say that I loved coming down to this windswept coast but I did love Timbertop. Like most of us who've been there it's where I had my first opportunity to go out into the bush for extended periods. It was where I learnt how to persevere when conditions got tough. But while I was toughened I was also made more sensitive, that's the wonderful thing about nature, it awakens a deeper awareness of life and keeps alive that precious child within, our soul.

When I left school I had no intention of being a Himalayan climber. I'm utterly amazed at the way my life has turned out.

I'm ashamed to say that I must have had one of the lowest final year English marks ever at GGS. Now I make part of my living from writing and I recently received 'Best Writer of the Year' award from Australian Geographic. It's not ability that got me there but a lot of perseverance and a bit of feeling.

My first Himalayan expedition was mind-boggling. Despite the fact that I had no money and little experience, I managed in my third year of having taken up climbing, to go to the Himalaya. The mountain was Dunagiri, a 7000 metre peak in Garhwal. Our party of 15 from the ANU mountaineering club was basically a bunch of novices when it came to the Himalaya. We should have been attempting something much lower, but then if you survive, there's something to be said from learning the hard way.

Because it was entirely new the whole experience from Delhi on to the mountains was extraordinarily exciting. It was exotic and fascinating, and that overpowering scale of the mountains seemed somehow ethereal. I was in absolute awe.

Even though I'd read all I could about the effects of altitude, my self-confidence suffered a devastating blow when I struggled into Base Camp at 4700 odd metres. Gasping for air I wondered how it was possible to go any higher. Due to porter difficulties our team had split up into several groups and I reached Base Camp with the second team.

Members of the first group were huddled around a makeshift open kitchen among some boulders sticking out of the snow. As well as an awful headache, I had a raging thirst and I'd long finished the contents of my water-bottle. I spotted some water steaming on a stove. I asked if I could have some and was invited to help myself. I did. Mixing some orange drink crystals with it I made a warm drink—just the thing for the way I was feeling.

As I tipped my head back for the last mouthful of my drink, everyone broke into great guffaws of laughter. After some time, for it takes time to catch your breath if you've laughed like they did at altitude, I was told that my climbing partner Lincoln had been boiling his underpants in the water! Apparently he thought boiling his more soiled clothes was the only way to clean them! After such an inauspicious start things could only have improved. I ended up acclimatising well and to my unending surprise I became the only member to reach the summit.

Mountaineering has to me been a form of exploration. I think that the urge to explore has been with us since the dawn of consciousness. I've always felt compelled by my horizon to wonder what lies beyond. Mountains have always drawn me to their flanks, to their streams and forests and ultimately their summits.

But as well as the outer journey and adventure there is an inner journey of exploration that we must face. In these times when virtually every last vestige of our earth has been recorded and studied, when the minutest detail of life has been dissected and named and even space and the very origin of the universe has been probed, it is appropriate and I believe crucial that we finally turn to ourselves. We know so much about everything yet so little about ourselves.

A great hero of mine is Sir Laurens van der Post. I think he's a prophet in the true sense of the word and he has this to say on what I'm talking about:

'Man is everywhere dangerously unaware of himself. We really know nothing about the nature of man, and unless we hurry to get to know ourselves we are in dangerous trouble.'

Jung and the Story of Our Time, 1976, p.239

'There is somewhere beyond it all, an undiscovered country to be pioneered and explored, and only a few lonely and mature spirits take it seriously and are trying to walk it.'

About Blady, 1991, p.87

Having been fulfilled by the physical challenge I'm perhaps more compelled than most to look into this remaining challenge. Maybe to cast some light into the depths of the problem we should look at one aspect of human nature, one which Sir James Darling (then Dr Darling) was constantly admonishing us for, our greed.

For much of my life I've been lucky to have been afforded the luxury of indulging myself in activities I love. Money has very seldom been the motivation for what I've done and when it has been, it has always left me feeling the poorer. This realisation is nothing new, the Bible makes numerous mentions of the folly of chasing wealth and closer to home, as Dr Darling so succinctly said in a sermon given 43 years ago:

'If there is to be any hope for the world, indeed if you really want to find satisfaction and happiness in your life, you must regard the return you will receive as a secondary consideration, if a consideration at allseek money first and you will ruin your land, or betray your profession...'

The Education of a Civilized Man, James R. Darling, 1962, p.167

But despite all that we continue to suffer, along with the world, from our greed. Are we that stupid? Well yes and no. The real question is why does greed exist and so tenaciously? Clearly we need a deeper understanding of human nature.

Though looking into our nature, the human condition, may be confronting and difficult, it is without question the only way out. No one in their right mind would deny that humanity is in dire straits, I suspect even on this very occasion warnings have been issued about over-population, environmental degradation, resource depletion, species extinction and all that end-play scenario. It's depressing as hell and I fear some of it is true. Despite decades of warnings, the horror goes on, the lanes of Bosnia, the streets of Belfast, the fields of Cambodia and the sands and marshes of the gulf are examples, all too graphic, that the civility of our race is skin deep. I think this quote from General Omar Bradley holds as true today as when it was first uttered 45 years ago:

‘The world has achieved brilliance...without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.’

From his Veterans Day address, delivered at Boston Massachusetts Nov. 10 1948

For the most part we cope by trying to be positive. An enduring image in my mind is the Monty Python team waltzing along to Armageddon singing ‘Always look on the bright side of life’. Humour helps us cope too but there remains the unsolved, unaddressed deeper issues.

If we are to look into those deeper issues, how then do we venture there and what are the qualities needed?

Without wanting to put too much burden on the shoulders of the young, it is first and foremost up to the younger generation to come to terms with that deeper problem. The older generations are necessarily set in their ways and quite wisely, to quote Dr Darling, the minds of most men and women are not adaptable after a certain age (see *The Education of a Civilized Man*, Sir James Darling, p.53). But to lead the way we need, at this time more than ever before, a new kind of moral leadership. One that doesn’t bow to political correctness or popular opinion but one that is full of sensitivity and courage.

All of you who are at school today have the job of turning the world around from the unthinkable. That’s serious business all right but it ought not be likened to the irksome seriousness which on occasion accompanies one into school exams, rather going out into life ought to be faced with the seriousness accorded with doing something one likes— building a tree-house, going for a surf or whatever else makes you spark and fills you with enthusiasm.

I have often heard enthusiastic people being described as childish. It’s true that childhood can especially lay claim to the quality of enthusiasm, it’s one of the qualities which makes childhood so special. We’ve all heard the retort ‘Why don’t you grow up!’ and it’s a commonly held view that school is to facilitate growing up. Well I think that school ought to prolong childhood not shorten it.

In all of known creation we are the only species to be fully conscious. The length of time we spend in infancy and childhood, the time before we reach the age when typically we reproduce, is more than twice that of our closest primate relatives. So just from the biology, apart from what our conscience tells us, ought we not to be treating childhood as something sacred? Ought we not to be trying to let it run its full natural length?

To let a young person into the world unshielded is a sure way of forcing them to grow up quicker than is natural. In a sense unsupervised television for the young speeds their passage through the innocence of childhood. Competition is another way of speeding that passage because today our emphasis on competition is cock-eyed.

In sport, the incentive of winning has been blown out of all proportion; it should never be the sole purpose of a game, it’s like money being the sole purpose of working. Absurd, indeed it’s a deadly attitude. In professional sport the stakes are so high that you’re either a winner or a failure. The real spirit of participating, playing your hardest, giving yourself in the service of the team has paled and individual glory stands over it in brutal domination. I suppose that’s appropriate enough in these selfish times but we all know it’s wrong. The childness of play no longer seems to matter in sport and I think that’s a great pity.

And in the classroom itself the modern emphasis on intellectual excellence does nothing much I fear to foster childhood, indeed in the long term it does little to foster what we need most of all—good leadership.

This is not to suggest that cleverness need not be fostered, for it must be, but cleverness alone will never get us out of trouble. Cleverness by itself is like a racing car without a competent driver, it needs guidance. (Note, Sir James Darling agrees with this; in *'The Education of a Civilized Man'* p.97 he says that 'Conscience is the executive part of consciousness'.) There's a balance which desperately needs restoring. We need to cultivate that fundamental and vitally important component in us that is so rarely acknowledged, namely the child within us, our innocent instinctive self or soul from which our conscience comes. This is the essential quality that I suggest is required for true leadership. A quality that this school, to its eternal credit, is concerned with fostering.

As Tracy Chapman hauntingly sings, '**All you have got is your soul**'. She goes on to say as much as—once you cash your soul in on the fast lane of life you are bankrupt.

A school can and must do much to foster that component as is perhaps most succinctly put by Michael Persse when he wrote for the *Corian* that true education consists of the recognition and restoration of primal innocence. (M. D. deB C. P. the *Corian* April 1982.) Elsewhere he has written that conscience is a special feature of OGG. (From the invitation to Sir James Darling's 90th birthday dinner that appears as a supplement to *The Geelong Grammarian* No.19 May 1989.) **And I rather like the comment made by someone that if you'd been to GGS you might drift but you'd never drift without a conscience.** (See *The Education of a Civilized Man*, p.96.)

If there is any one true quality which GGS can claim, and it's the most valuable a school can have, it is the commitment to nurturing its charges in an atmosphere of idealism. There has been, and I hope there always will be, less emphasis on competition and academic excellence at Geelong. Less emphasis on conforming to the pressures of the outside world, more emphasis on allowing everyone to find their own inspired level—in fact a dedication to restoring soul in its students and the security and sensitivity which comes with it.

The oft-repeated criticism that to foster the sensitive side of life in students is to weaken them to the predation of the competitive world outside bears no substance at all. It is the sensitive who have always brought meaningful change and as Dr Darling said; '**it requires more toughness to resist the world than to join in the rat-race**' (see *The Education of a Civilized Man*, p.96). He recognised that our '**future lies not with the predatory and the immune but with the sensitive who live dangerously**' (Charles E. Raven, *Science, Religion and the Future*, 1943, p.103 and mentioned in James Darling's *The Education of a Civilized Man*, pp.33 and 63).

Weary Dunlop told me that it was the leadership and courage shown by Laurens van der Post at the beginning of their respective POW experiences, which had set the tone for that heroic and remarkable struggle for survival during World War II. I can think of few men of our century more sensitive and aware than Sir Laurens. Great leaders are those that are sensitive and tough. The sensitive and secure, with their natural born conscience closer to the surface, are better equipped to know right from wrong. Thus armed their vision of our original purpose gives them a very clear awareness of what they are doing. It is leadership of that calibre that we so desperately need to deliver us from the mess we're temporarily in.

So what I'm suggesting is that the essence of leadership is soundness and that the essence of soundness is soul, which paradoxical as you might think it is, is that child within. The responsibility of education as Michael Persse said is the recognition and restoration of that primal innocence.

Only in the cultivation and application of that primal innocence can we begin to put a stop to the horror on earth that by good fortune, we have largely avoided.

Indeed Australia's isolation has been our salvation, it has enabled us to preserve and shelter that child within so that we can grow up secure and strong and that is a priceless privilege, not for ourselves but the world.

Every day I hear criticism of our lack of sophistication, that we are just a 'bunch of ockers'. Indeed some of our notable politicians adopt the sophisticated tastes of the Old World while they strut the world stage and talk of 'national identity'. I think they are far off the mark.

The very essence of Australia is our lack of sophistication—our refusal to conform to pretension and superficiality. We ought to be upholding our 'fair-dinkumness' and all the qualities so well documented in our folklore, the non-conformity of the swagman in *Waltzing Matilda* whose down to earth motto would I'm sure, have been 'I'd rather be ignorant and fair dinkum than sophisticated and false'. Of course life has been a fight against ignorance, but the danger has always been that gaining knowledge rarely occurs without an increase in sophistication or falseness.

The real strengths of the Australian character are the result of our isolation from sophistication. But that isolation is being daily eroded by the insidious and negative side of global communication. The down side of global communication is that it spreads sophistication and indeed encourages our alienation from primal innocence.

It takes strong, sound leadership, that correspondingly rare commodity, which is afflicted with neither an excess of pity nor callousness, to stand against the insipid tide of superficiality that is sweeping the world. Almost daily one reads and is told that a new age is dawning, that new sensibilities are coming into play, that environmental awareness and 'right ways of living' will solve our problems. But I feel that almost without exception the numerous interest groups which claim to occupy the high ground of our ideals are pseudo forms of idealism for they only concern themselves with the symptoms and shy away from addressing the fundamental cause.

To quote that consummate historian and scientist Jacob Bronowski:

'I am infinitely saddened to find myself suddenly surrounded in the west by a sense of terrible loss of nerve, a retreat from knowledge into—into what? Into Zen Buddhism; into falsely profound questions ... into extrasensory perception and mystery. They do not lie along the line of what we are now able to know if we devote ourselves to it: an understanding of man himself.'

The Ascent of Man, 1973, p.437

False forms of idealism are everywhere, ready to seduce the masses into feeling righteous while we become blinded to greater suffering and the cause of it all which is our own nature.

On how many occasions have we seen people flock in their hundreds to rescue beached whales? Yet we send animals to the slaughter by the thousands every day and each night we

have our own kind dying on the street from neglect. This is not a plea for vegetarianism but an illustration of society's hypocrisy. Dolphin-free tuna is another example — when will we have tuna-free dolphin?

It's a yearly event now to rally round and pick up rubbish. Families get out for a day to fill up their cars and trailers with rubbish insensitively dropped by others. I've a picture in my mind of kids decked out in lycra jump-suits enthusiastically bobbing around collecting as much as they can whilst Dad carefully drives his extravagant car along the verge. Occasionally his gold-chained wrist reaches down to pick up something. At the end of the day the neighbourhood is spotless, a ready candidate for the Tidy Town award, and the kids go home with the feeling they have been idealistic. Meanwhile around the world another war, another famine continues to take its toll. Let us pick up rubbish by all means but let us not for a moment fool ourselves that we are being truly good. To be truly good we ought to strive as best we can to be rich in spirit rather than rich in possessions and be seeking within for the causes which lead to our nest being fouled. [Note, only three months after giving this illustration of superficiality in the world today the man who introduced a rubbish clean-up campaign was named Australian of the Year!]

Again the point is, to quote Antoine de Saint-Exupery: **'We are living through deeply anxious days and if we are to relieve our own anxiety we must diagnose its cause'**. *A Sense of Life*, 1965, p.127.

I talked earlier of a need for a new kind of moral leadership; well perhaps it's not so new it's just that the call today is as urgent as it was when Dr Darling said this, perhaps the most significant of all his utterances, on speech day in 1950:

'We need in this generation, as we have had them in the past, men of conscience, driven, even against their wills, certainly against their own interest, to take a stand for principles. Men not afraid of facing unpleasant facts, not afraid of being different in their views from other people, men who cannot rest so long as opportunities remain to work for the really great human objectives—peace, justice, honesty and decency between men.'

Corian Dec. 1950 and quoted in Weston Bate's Light Blue Down Under, 1990, p.219

That if it is anything, and in my mind it is everything, is a call to strike out on a less used path. To pick up our rucksacks and take the road of truth and self-confrontation, to spurn the self-righteous milieu of political correctness and pseudo-idealism.

With that call to arms as it were, Dr Darling joined the ranks of other visionaries like Laurens van der Post and Antoine de Saint-Exupery who also point the way down that road (significantly Dr Darling said that they were the leaders in the world of literature [see p.36 *The Education of a Civilized Man*]).

I hope that what I've been saying is clear to you.

That it is agreed that there is grave concern for our predicament.

That the only way out is through a profound understanding of ourselves.

That to venture into that terrain is difficult.

That to get anywhere along the path that we must follow requires the courage of a lion and the sensitivity and the lack of alienation of a child.

Typically, many great breakthroughs in battle occur when a series of crucial elements, by good luck and sound management occur at the right place and in the right sequence, to initiate the breach in enemy lines that leads to victory.

Those of you who know much about me will know that I have the highest regard for the work of Old Geelong Grammarian Jeremy Griffith. After some six years studying his biological, rational explanation for human nature, (principally written in his book *Beyond The Human Condition*) I am convinced he has made the crucial breach in our war to understand ourselves. In fact without these understandings I would have had great difficulty in describing the problem as I have today and I suggest that that in itself is some evidence that a breakthrough has been made.

I suggest that all our problems—the ones we can now address properly—stem from this psychological war within each and every one of us. A war that rages on in an attempt to reconcile the ‘spiritual opposites’ in our nature so often quoted by Laurens van der Post. Indeed it was his writing, so full of soul, which cleared the path for Jeremy’s understandings. It was Dr Darling whose steering of this school gave the structure that produced the strength needed. As he anticipated, he fostered soul in order that **‘ere the end, some work of noble note may yet be done’** (*Corian* Dec. 1950 and also in Weston Bate’s, *Light Blue Down Under*, 1990, p.219).

The other crucial elements which brought us the likes of Jeremy, who is a prophet in the true sense (for there are many false ones) were his upbringing in the Australian bush, with all its soundness and innocence, by his parents who nurtured him in the best Australian tradition.

The Australian element was anticipated in A. D. Hope’s 1931 poem *Australia* where he described the value of Australia’s innocent freedom from sophisticated intellectualism.

**Yet there are some like me turn gladly home
From the lush jungle of modern thought, to find
The Arabian desert of the human mind,
Hoping, if still from the deserts the prophets come,**

**Such savage and scarlet as no green hills dare
Springs in that waste, some spirit which escapes
The learned doubt, the chatter of cultured apes
Which is called civilization over there.**

Though one of us has broken through, it is of little use unless the mass of us do so. I urge those of you who are young and able, to take that path. It will take all the strength and sensitivity you have but surely to reach that coveted summit of our ideals must be the worthiest goal of all and worth the greatest hardships.

Remember that you have that courage and sensitivity within and don’t be tempted by false ideals.

Now whenever I come across any tough going I look back to when I was last on Everest and I was struggling up onto the windswept south-east ridge. It was 3am, the time when the

likes of the KGB used to arrest people because that's when most people's metabolism is at its lowest ebb in the body's diurnal rhythm. Mine certainly was. The going was so hard and my body so unwilling that I began to have thoughts of turning back. But then I began to think of all my friends down at Base Camp who had helped me get to where I was. I knew they would if they could, be keenly anticipating my every move and with the natural generosity of any team would be willing me on with every step. Realising this kept my spirits up just enough to push on.

Then I began to think of everyone else back home who had been interested in what I was doing and I knew that they too would be willing me on, in fact I began to have a feeling that I was being urged on by anyone who valued that tenacity in life that makes you hold on and give it all you've got. And my mind cast over the countless heroic deeds performed daily by ordinary people who, finding themselves down, draw deeply from within and find the courage to fight back and right the balance. This feeling of participating in a shared struggle to journey onward is what kept me going and what keeps me going now.

Any great project is overwhelming when viewed in totality. Back then on the morning of May 11 in 1990, even though I only had a thousand feet to climb, the rigours of climbing without oxygen made that thousand feet seem like infinity. An impossible distance. However all I had to worry about was the next five steps. If that's all I ever worried about I knew that sooner or later I would cover that impossible seeming distance.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for giving me this opportunity to speak to you. ”

(*The Education of a Civilised Man* is out of print however copies can be borrowed from the WTM library.)

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