

“Take with you words and return to the Lord”

Words? No, Rev, please, no more words! But really, what else is there to take with you from School? To be sure, a plethora of experiences and a myriad of memories. Yet those, too, are carried on the wings of words and may even mean more than the words on a piece of parchment.

Alright, last words. At last, you say. The last day of High School! Hooray! At last, your parents say! Perhaps with great sighs of relief! And for some parents, this is their last graduation day, too! Graduation Day and Ben Mackey’s birthday, to boot! Well, you have all made it! Was there really any doubt? Well, of course. You had to do it and you have done it all!

Today you step up and step out, the graduating class of 2014, the graduating class in the 225th anniversary year of the founding of King’s Collegiate School, now King’s-Edgehill. You are the pride of your parents and grandparents, of your teachers and coaches, of your friends and families, of your Headmaster and Chaplain. In a matter of a few hours you will no longer be High School students but alumni and graduates. It seems that something has finally and at long last come to an end. But in what sense of an end?

This service is called *Encaenia*, a Greek word (εγκαινια: εν & καινος) that signifies something new and fresh, a kind of beginning, it might seem. It refers to a festival of dedication and a renewal of devotion, and to the idea of consecration, a kind of holy commitment. Dedications have to do with commitment to what defines you; in other words, to a renewal of a sense of purpose and identity, especially for institutions. Originally used for the anniversary dedication of temples and churches, it has become associated with “*the annual commemoration of founders and benefactors at Oxford University in June*” (O.E.D.) and, by extension to many other schools and colleges throughout the world, such as King’s-Edgehill, founded upon those traditions. It is more commonly known as Commencement. It conveys the double sense of beginnings and endings.

“*In my end is my beginning,*”¹ as the poet, T.S. Eliot puts it. For “*what we call the beginning is often the end/ And to make an end is to make a beginning./The end is where we start from.*”² The end really means purpose. The *telos* or end, as Aristotle teaches, is that for which something exists. Of course, some parents may be very definite about what they think you are meant to be, like a certain lady who was walking down the street with her two grandchildren when a friend stopped to ask her how old they were. To which she replied, “*The doctor is five and the lawyer is seven.*” Does that sound at all familiar?

But it is more likely that your *telos* or end for you in that sense is all a bit unclear. Perhaps more like the story of the father and his son in conversation with the High School guidance counsellor. The father asks, “*Is there any chance that my son can get into M.I.T?*” to which the counsellor said, “*I am sorry. No.*” “*You’ve ruined my dream!*” the

¹ T.S. Eliot, ‘East Coker’, *The Four Quartets*.

² T.S. Eliot, ‘Little Gidding’, *The Four Quartets*.

father exclaims at which point the son interjects, "It's okay, Dad, it's not my dream." You have to own what you do and what you become.

We are all part of something much larger than ourselves. You are part an institution shaped by ideals and principles, a world "*made by words*," as it were.³ And it is part of you.

Encaenia renews us in the end or *telos* of the School which is inescapably part of you. We have had various occasions, especially in this anniversary year, to reflect on that larger sense of purpose signaled in the mottoes of the School emblazoned on your blazers and elsewhere throughout the campus, the motto of the School and the College, *Deo Legi Regi Gregi*, (for God, the Law, the King and the People) complemented by the Edgehill motto, *fideliter* (Faithfulness). Potent and powerful concepts, indeed. But what qualities of character and personality belong to such purposes and ends? "*Gentleness, manliness and learning*."

Manliness? Now there's a problem! Yet these three qualities belong to an extraordinary project, the idea of an education that seeks to produce gentlemen and scholars, ladies and scholars, who will be committed to public life and service. The *telos* or purpose of the School is situated within a much larger tradition of learning and service. Manliness reaches back to Homer's world of "*men with chests*," as it were. Now there's a problem too! It refers to a Greek word, *thumos* (θυμος), the principle for what animates and moves the heart and soul to noble action through strength and courage, through a kind of spiritedness and commitment to truth and honour. Far from being merely a property of males, it is used of both men and women - of Achilles and Penelope in Homer's world, for example - from which it carries over into the trajectories of moral philosophy from Plato onwards. "*It is what moves individuals from thought to action*."⁴ Manliness is about our humanity, *humanitas*, we might reasonably call it, the qualities or virtues that belong to the truth and dignity of our humanity.

I know, such concepts seem so quaint and old-fashioned and yet we neglect them at our peril. "*We make men without chests and expect from them virtue and enterprise. We laugh at honor and are shocked to find traitors in our midst*," as C.S. Lewis puts it in *The Abolition of Man*. In our neglect we become the betrayers of the very things that define us and give us life and purpose.

Gentleness, *humanitas*, and learning are the concepts which capture the idea of a liberal arts education, the very thing envisioned in the founding of the School, not by doctors or lawyers, nor by merchants and landowners, nor by politicians and scientists - the word had yet to be invented - but by clergymen. It didn't mean 'only religion' for that would be a kind of fundamentalism that betrays religion, but it doesn't mean 'no religion' either for that would be another kind of fundamentalism, the fundamentalism of secular atheism. No. A liberal arts education speaks to the dignity and honour of free

³ Anthony Grafton, *Worlds made by Words: Scholarship and Community in the Modern West*, 2009.

⁴ Christopher Nelson, President of St. John's College, Annapolis, Convocation Address, 2003.

men and women and belongs to a long history and tradition of education of which religion is an integral part.

None of these things can be taken for granted. When we neglect them, things fall apart. There have been times when the idea of a gentleman and a scholar became opposed concepts either through the arrogance and ignorance of the ruling classes in their disdain for learning or through the selfish pride and vanity of the pedant who sees no need to contribute to the good of others. What is lost is the middle term, manliness or *humanitas*. What gets lost is our humanity.

Learning is both something in and of itself as well as something which has practical effects. It isn't about information so much as it is about knowledge and wisdom and those things always connect us to a community, to one another. Gentleness encloses within its writ such things as compassion and courtesy which also have very much to do with ourselves and with one another. "*I have suffered with those that I saw suffer,*" Miranda says in Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*. Nothing captures better the idea of compassion, the root word for which (again in Greek) refers to the inmost being of a person, the heart, the liver, the soul. All these things speak to an understanding of our humanity. Our self-awareness equally means our awareness of others.

This is not new to you. You have heard these ideas many, many times in one way or another, particularly here in Chapel. But the point is that we never fully grasp them. In a way we are always only growing into them. They are the "*unknown knowns*."

In 2003 Donald Rumsfeld, former US Secretary of Defense, famously stated that "*there are known knowns. These are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns. That is to say, there are things that we know we don't know. But there are also unknown unknowns. There are things we don't know we don't know.*" He was, as the brilliant Slovakian philosopher, Slavoj Žižek, observes, indulging "*in a little bit of amateur philosophising,*" but had forgotten to add a crucial fourth term, the "*unknown knowns,*" the things we know but don't know that we know. And yet those are the things which we are always in the process of trying to understand and to realise in our lives.

In this sense, the task "*is not to provide answers or solutions, but to submit to critical analysis the questions themselves, to make us see how the very way we perceive a problem is an obstacle to its solution.*"⁵ We discover our prejudices and our biases and learn to become more thoughtful and more careful towards others. Such an approach to education counters the narcissism and the nihilism of our age. It is about being human in an increasingly "*posthuman universe.*" At issue is a sense of self and others and, I would argue, a sense of God without which self and others are not really thinkable.

It all belongs to the *telos*, the end or purpose, of the School and to you, but only to the extent that you make these ideals and principles your own.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, Philosophy, the "unknown knowns", and the public use of reason. *Topoi*. Vol. 25, No. 1-2, p. 137-142, 2006. (English).

"Take with you words and return to the Lord," we heard in the lesson which Jacob read from *Hosea*, the great love-prophet of the Hebrew Scriptures. To return here means repentance which is about the self in conscious movement back to that from which it has turned away. There is, in short, a renewing of ourselves in such a turning back but only by taking with us words, words which ultimately return us to a community of spirit. And isn't that what we heard in the lesson which Jenna read, the story of Pentecost where unity and order come out of the chaos and the babble of the nations? The story is a deliberate reprise of the story of the Tower of Babel. The human community has no unity in itself; yet by the power of God one thing is heard in and through the diverse voices of various nations under earth, the praise of God. Yea, God! We could easily substitute in that passage the many tongues and languages of our School: Albanian, Ashanti, Russian, French, German, Spanish, Thai, Mandarin, Japanese, Hindi, not to mention all the variants of English, from Chester Road to Cape Breton. You have come from different cultures and with different languages but you have entered into the culture of the School. It has been your common experience. *"Take with you words."*

What words? A Headmaster's word, *"Fantastic!"* A Chaplain's word, *"Splendid!"* A Mr. Darcy Walsh word, *"Outstanding!"* A Mr. Kim Walsh word, *"Spectacular!"* A Mr. Dale Block word, *"Awesome!"* A Ms. Strickey word, *"Lovely!"* A Mr. DeCoste word, *"Totally insane!"* – okay, that's two words! Yet these are all words which speak to your accomplishments celebrated on this day.

You have done it all and you have done it with class: athletics, academics, arts and music, IB busy, busy, busy, Extended Essays, TOK, cadets, chapel – *'these are a few of your favourite things'*. You have learned to face yourselves and one another, and not merely on facebook. There has been romance at center ice; romance at assembly – all a kind of manliness and all rather sweet. You have shown us your humanity. Some of you have been here for a third of your lives but all of you have been part of something. Yet the School is not just you. It is also faculty who come and go. Last year, Ms. Janet Nickerson, following a Maritime tradition, left for the West after twenty years of teaching at KES; this year, Mr. Dale Block, who has been here as long as some of you lifers, also heads West, though for him it is about returning home. And yet we have all been together in the educational culture of this rather special and unique school. *"Take with you words."*

One of you has somehow remembered from Grade Ten, Portia's words about mercy, that *"earthly power doth then show likest God's/ When mercy seasons justice"*⁶ and cleverly used it to get out of being grounded. Who says words aren't useful and that learning isn't practical? Well done, Nathaniel! *"Take with you words."*

"I call shotgun," I overheard Erica say one morning before Chapel. I was puzzled. What did she mean? But apparently, 'shotgun' in KES Chapel language means *"I got the cross!"* Who knew? *"Take with you words."*

⁶ Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, Act 4, Scene 1, ll. 195-196.

We have laughed and sung, danced and cried, struggled and suffered, talked and thought and fought ... together. And if we have been in your face at times, it was because we cared. You are all quite dear to us. We have been together on a journey where *"the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time."*⁷

You go forth into a dark and difficult world but I have good hope that you take with you words that speak to our humanity. I want to end, before I cry, with some words from Passenger's *"Scare away the dark."*

*We should laugh, we should cry,
We should love, we should dream
We should stare at the stars and not just the screens
You should hear what I'm saying and know what it means
...*

*Well, we wish we were happier, thinner and fitter,
We wish we weren't losers and liars and quitters
We want something more not just nasty and bitter
We want something real not just hash tags and Twitter
...*

*We're scared of drowning, flying and shooters
But we're all slowly dying in front of computers [expletive deleted]

So sing, sing at the top of your voice,
Oh, love without fear in your heart.
Can you feel, feel like you still have a choice
If we all light up we can scare away the dark⁸*

If anyone can light up the dark, I have good hope that it will be you guys. *"Take with you words"* that have meaning through memory and association and grow into their meaning. Go with grace and may God go with you.

"Take with you words and return to the Lord"

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Encaenia 2014*

⁷ T.S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *The Four Quartets*.

⁸ <http://www.lyrics.com/scare-away-the-dark-lyrics-passenger.html>