



This document is a transcript of Geelong Grammar School Principal, Rebecca Cody's address to the International Table Luncheon at The Australian Club in Melbourne on Monday 3 May 2021.

I acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we gather, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and take inspiration from their enduring wisdom.

I respect deeply the past, present and emerging indigenous Elders across the globe, recognising and valuing forebears and families, and their intergenerational and continuing connection to land, waters and culture.

I celebrate too the members of the Geelong Grammar School community who are with us today: Old Geelong Grammarians, Clyde Old Girls and Hermitage Old Girls, prospective, former and current families and staff, and Directors of School Council whose significant contribution to strengthening our School and broader community is keenly felt.

My professional role in our community has been assigned the titles of Principal, educator, teacher. As a form of introduction, a retelling of a formative experience offers insight into why and how those titles and their associated responsibilities come to life.

As an overweight and an unremarkable child, the possibility of influencing others was not a contemplation of my youth. Nor was the idea that individual voices can be raised for advocacy. Rather, my ideal role was to withdraw and observe.

Ironically though, my appearance drew attention. The cruellest moment was the day I braved wearing bathers in public. Rotund and rosy cheeked, I walked the beach path with my towel strategically placed. A passing car of teenagers pulled over; the girl in the passenger seat politely asked, "Excuse me, can you come here?" I hurried to the open window in a spirit of trust and helpfulness.

"What on earth *are* you?" The pitch of the ensuing laughter has stayed with me. The feeling of *not belonging* – of being duped, mocked and ridiculed – of being shamed and excluded, – was jolt – not from a person but from the world itself.

On the one hand, 35 or so years later, this recollection seems so petty to mention. The distance between my adult self and that 10-year-old child seems immeasurable and unbridgeable. Of course, this incident did not define me – and I now understand that one of the most important – perhaps *the* most important reason why, – is because deep within me *as a human being* was the insistence that despite all appearances and all the laughter – I did belong.

The people in the car were wrong. This was beyond my understanding and words at that time. I would much later in my life give this conviction, lying latent within me, a name. I would call it a sense of intrinsic human dignity.

It was experiences like this, and an education of literature, theatre and philosophy that introduced me to the importance of reflecting upon humanity's complexities and cruelties; specifically, Simone de Beauvoir's judiciousness that, "One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others".

A year or so on from the beach side encounter a rare opportunity presented itself. Through the skill and vision of expert teachers, I found myself recommended for a film audition. Securing a professional acting role at 12 feels as unbelievable today as it did then. I entered an unknown landscape and discovered the freedom of pretending to inhabit another life. That opportunity was the event that propelled me: I discovered that my years of shyness and quiet observation had incubated a longing to understand others and now role play was one avenue to do so.

Across a period of representing ideas through imagined characters, I grew the confidence to unearth my own voice. Again, through the encouragement of master teachers, I was invited to compete nationally in public speaking. Although frequently immobilised by nerves and self-doubt, with the support of others, I always managed to find my voice: using story, audiences connected to a narrative, and this resulted in an empowering realisation: one voice at a time, one choice at a time, individuals can influence group thinking and even stimulate a potential change in others' behaviour.

Whilst this is a bold claim, especially considering the nativity of my adolescent addresses, it is offered humbly: it didn't occur to me that I could ever be a voice *influencing* others. For the students in our care at Geelong Grammar, this notion of influencing is perhaps worlds apart from the social media influencers who inhabit their screens; for every device there is another 'app' connecting to supermodels, sports stars, celebrities, and lifestyle gurus, all offering tantalising, often photoshopped, snapshots of their wildly successful existence. The definition of said success is amusing at best and corrupting at worst; the associated affluenza and narcissism are detached from our country's foundational identity and, as we recently honoured, the ANZAC spirit. The former is indulged and self-serving; the latter a definition of citizenship - efforts to support community, not individual needs.

Modern Australia is a place of diversity where so many have travelled to unite and build a sense of belonging and identity. Whether that identity is of a nation, state, school, family or individual, it is grounded by embedded values as reflected in our lexicon and actions - language that becomes mindsets and mindsets that beget behaviours. This too is the advantaged space of educators: the influence of our words and deeds can indeed be remarkable; we help set the character and compass of a generation; we are part of generational identity imprinting.

With an iconic Australian identity of its own, for 165 years Geelong Grammar has sought to provide students with the knowledge, faith, agility, and compassion to create purposeful and enterprising lives: lives that prioritise wellbeing and creativity; that seek truth and justice; lives that look beyond self. In celebrating the strengths of our School's past, championing its present standing and inviting a reimagining of its future, the sagacity of Luke's Gospel is resonant: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required".

In bringing clarity to what is required of us right now, I am struck that if COVID-19 hadn't unravelled in 2020 and this speaking engagement proceeded as originally invited to do so in that same year, there's no doubt my address would have been shaped differently.

There were moments in 2020 that shook me to the core; tragic moments that have changed me; complex moments that have wearied me; and ultimately, reawakening moments. Through the loss of a young life and the process of making difficult decisions to safeguard the future of Geelong Grammar, I have come to know how change can stir darkness and just how significant schools can be through times of crisis and times of celebration. Crisis and celebration are formative experiences in developing community culture.

The identity, health and culture of our country are only as strong as the young people our community raises. Instead of thinking of schools as centres to reform all social ills, we might be better placed to reflect upon the positive difference that collective responsibility releases. This is not to suggest stepping aside from schools' accountabilities; rather, it is about intentionally sharing the important work of shaping society through quality engagement and education of our young people. This should not just be the business of parents, teachers, and grandparents.

Of course, any contemplation of how we educate for a better society reveals an orbit of ideas spanning the centuries. How best we can live together and how we personally can lead a more dignified and sustainable life, can be stimulated through reading and conversation.

The more I read and converse, the more certain I feel about knowing very little and the stronger my yearning to return to school and begin all over again! Ideally this opportunity would skip the mess of puberty and teenage angst, and centre on the curriculum of ideals. Through the miracles of modern science, time transportation might just gift me the teachers of Plato and Aristotle.

Thousands of years later, their holistic understanding of all elements of human nature – both the positive and the destructive – continues to guide education in its broadest sense. Their concept of the three parts of the human psyche, consisting in spirit, appetite, and reason, remains evocative in this contemporary context. For these classical philosophers, a flourishing human being was one whose reason was in control of their spirit and appetite, much as a charioteer oversaw two horses.

The role of educators is to encourage reason to be in control of our actions, and to nurture in our students a perpetual delight in learning, logic, and courageous behaviour. For me, this is about enabling wise voices and choices to emerge through the engagement of the 'head, heart and hands'. We want our students to lead both a purposeful life *and* a flourishing life. Arguably, without purpose, there is no capacity to flourish.

Plato's *The Republic* suggests that to flourish is to live as a member of society who is both a partner and a helper. He went further to ask what this really means, living as a partner and helper? Plato's answer speaks to drawing out and cultivating one's intrinsic gifts and abilities and contributing them to the well-being of the whole of society.

This meaning is consistent with the parts of the body being members by contributing to the well-being of the whole body; or the people in a team or a workplace being members by contributing to the well-being of the whole team or the whole workplace. Each member contributes their gifts and abilities to the benefit of the body - or the benefit of the team - or the benefit of the workplace. And the better educated the person's gifts and abilities are, the more they will excel at being a partner and helper who contributes to the well-being of the whole.

Excel as a member. Excel as belonging.

This fundamental idea of Plato's meant that, for him, education is the process of drawing out a person's intrinsic sense of membership and belonging by enabling them to contribute their gifts and abilities to the well-being of the whole. It is in this, Plato believed, *that true human recognition* is found. The recognition of belonging, dignity and respect.

Plato was also well aware that human beings have the capacity to let these foundational truths about their nature as human beings allude them in pursuit of *individual* gain, *individual* advantage and *individual* success. This, he insisted, was contrary to true human happiness because we are profoundly in need of one another's gifts and abilities – and we are profoundly in need of these gifts and abilities being cultivated and contributed – which is to say, *we are profoundly in need of being educated*.

Finally, Plato believed, human beings must learn how to live together, or they will not live at all. They will be continually torn apart by division and war.

There need not be a battle for conflict, tension and segregation to abound. Across four campuses with 700 staff, close to 1600 students, including 800 boarders and even more families, as well as a broader community of tens of thousands of Old Geelong Grammarians, past parents and staff, there's ample fodder for unrest as we adapt to what being a partner and helper means. Within this context, plus a myriad of items of compliance and everyday care for so many, I reflect frequently upon three concepts and their allied questions.

Firstly, how to unearth the courage of prioritising and modelling ethicality. I regularly describe this to students as safeguarding one another's dignity within a framework of 'saying what you mean, meaning what you say and walking your talk'. Remembering to ask, 'How do my words and deeds align?' is a quick and accessible self-checking mechanism that denotes self-respect.

For educators, this mechanism does well to include making thinking visible. The principalship, for example, includes facing the most unexpected challenges and at such times, where appropriate, it is important for colleagues and students to see how you have thought about the complexity, the context, risks and choices you have considered before arriving at an outcome, and why you have determined this to be the best course of action. If we don't bring clarity to complexity and unpack our thinking, we may be denying the next generation the opportunity to understand and develop their own wisdom. Secondly, when facing difficult decisions, I often think about the question posed by the contemporary British-Ghanaian philosopher, Kwame Appiah: "What will future generations condemn us for?" This deceptively simple question centres what we know we should do, and somehow cuts through the noise of vested interests, competing values, misinformation, and support for the status quo. It is a pertinent thought experiment with particular potency when considering how it is we right the wrongs of child abuse, and violence against women; of how we respect mother earth; of how we honour indigeneity; and how we care for the elderly and those with disability.

Thirdly, it is vital to provide authentic opportunities for students to practice their own moral judgement and ethical skills in a relevant context. At Geelong Grammar this is partly woven into our ways of being as we learn and live together on a scale unknown anywhere else in Australia and second only to Eton. Due to our scale and truly global population, the impact of COVID-19 pressure tested our structures, systems and staff in ways not experienced before (or at least in living memory). There were sacrifices to be made in terms of usual freedoms and for many of our students, community safety trumped individual desires in expressions previously unknown. I recall vividly the outrage of 'everyday experts' who challenged our protocol of wearing masks in classrooms (an initiative introduced ahead of government direction). Resistance to these measures and the hysteria of toilet paper stocking piling, that has now transferred to vaccine stock piling, are all symptomatic of fear.

For Plato "courage is knowing not what to fear" and for Aristotle, we "will never do anything in the world without courage. It is the greatest quality of mind next to honour." One of the duties of the principalship is to drive fear out of schools, so that new teachers – and experienced ones too – feel that they are guided to determine the best outcomes for our community. They can ask for help, without fear. They can discuss difficult situations and wicked problems, without fear. They are confident that they will be met with wisdom and support.

For me, a common cause of disappointment is that our fear of recrimination or ostracism if we don't stand firm in our capacity to shut down a disrespectful, ill-informed and harmful crowd. In this space of disagreement, an emerging dying art may well be the intersection of active listening and seeking to understand through the conventions of

civilised conversations. The normalisation of unpleasantness, harassment, superiority, and unchecked power, (oftentimes activated by keyboard warriors or twittering assassins), damages relationships and can be a cumulative poison. In sourcing the courage and clarity to intervene, the question ‘Why am I permitting fear to dominate?’, helps reset a course of action.

- ‘How do my words and deeds align?’
- ‘What will future generations condemn us for?’
- ‘Why am I permitting fear to dominate?’

Just asking these questions stimulates possibilities.

I’ve come to recognise that the most important exchanges have proven consistently to be those motivated by such curiosity. Inherent in this virtue are vulnerability and humility. Their significance becomes apparent if you subscribe to the view that individuals yearn to be heard, understood and useful. This too is connected to an intrinsic sense of dignity and how it is protected if, as partners and helpers, we are agents of moral courage.

Moral agency is so important because the society we are born and socialized into has major structural defects that express themselves in both group and individual behaviour. Just as we all do, our young people encounter injustice, greed, laziness, shoddiness, cronyism, deception and so much more. They may even be promised a certain kind of success with enticing rewards if they subscribe to these unhealthy cultures: yet it will be this behaviour that tears at the fabric of society and that stands in direct opposition to working as a partner and helper. The only antidote to this temptation in a person, said Plato and Aristotle, is a heightened sense of their dignity as a human being and the moral courage, not only to refuse participation in such behaviour, but to call it out. We can only learn about dignity, courage and respect when we are the recipients: when we see it in action, when others lead by example.

Universally, ethics and education partner to examine the frameworks that underpin our society and how the greatest minds have approached perennial questions on how best to live, lead and learn. Whilst we don’t have to agree with all that we read and talk about, we must use others’ thinking to inform and scaffold contemporary practice, and to bring clarity to what dignity, courage, respect and belonging look and sound like in 2021.

In doing so, we may need to: leave a fear of change behind; sit with doubt and restlessness; step with grace and grit; and walk with hope. With the Aristotelian exemplar of roaming and debating with open-minded scholars, and pondering with peers, we may well find the impetus to run rejoicingly as moral agents who use the clarity of our voice and the legacy of our choices in a collective quest to redefine our ‘true blue’ citizenship.

Now, is this too grand a vision? ... too fanciful a curriculum of ideals? Absolutely not. If a 10-year-old girl can, through education, step the distance between a beachside incident of shaming and exclusion and walk to the Principalship of Geelong Grammar School – as a terrifying, daring, joyous adventure in still discovering what it means to belong – there should be no limits to our aspirations for our children and grandchildren.

In concluding my ever-evolving contemplations about educating for a better society, the gifts and blessings of my privilege, (namely, being well, safe, educated and engaged in meaningful work) invigorate a call to action that seeks courageous voices to be strengthened and comforted by our shared humanity; not divided by difference and derision. If ever the world needed young people to enter adult life with a strong sense of belonging, intrinsic human dignity and the moral courage to live in ways consistent with this, it is 2021.

With gratitude for the invitation to speak today, and without apology or explanation, I will continue to give my voice to any conversation that calls for courage and clarity in and through the primacy of education. I'll also persist in imagining the impact of a united understanding that our voices and choices become cultures we inhabit as we navigate darkness and light; without question, there is always greater belonging, more respect, more dignity and much more light when we understand that everyone matters.

Thank you.