

JEPPE GIRLS VALEDICTORY  
OCTOBER 2014

A valedictory speech is quite a strange thing. Here I am saying goodbye to you, and I have never actually met you. Here I am supposed to give you words of wisdom for your journey onwards, but actually you understand the 21<sup>st</sup> century better than I do.

The very first time you wrote the date, the full date, day month and year, you started the year with 20. That makes you different from all the rest of us, who had to unlearn 19. And there are a lot of other things we had to unlearn from the 20<sup>th</sup> century, not just starting the date with a one and a nine.

We, parents and teachers, are all of us shaped by the 20<sup>th</sup> century; you hardly at all. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is your century. You will shape it, it will shape you.

So if I can't give you advice about your century, what can I give you? Tonight, I offer you what I hope for you.

Some of these hopes are simple; some are quite complicated.

I hope first of all, that you will choose what you wear.

In Psalm 109 we read of someone who wore cursing as his garment, it entwined his body like water, the psalmist tells us, cursing entered into his bones like oil, he wore it like a cloak wrapped around him, like a belt tied around him forever.

Let's ignore the gender of this person being described. That's the way it is in the Old Testament, you can't do anything about it. Let's also ignore the cursing: that's neither here nor there, for what I want to say to you tonight.

What I want you to think about is this: what will enter your bones like oil? What will be tied like a belt forever around you? What garment will you wear? What will you be known by?

Will it be something that you choose, or will it be something that happens by chance? Will it be something that just rubs off, from your friends, or from your most-watched television programme?

Please note that I say 'most-watched' television programme, not favourite programme. Sometimes we devote a lot of our time to second-best. Going after the best people, the best ideas, the best series, takes time that we don't have to spare, takes energy that we just can't find. And so we are shaped by what is 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> best, not by our best choices.

What steps can we take to make sure that the garment we are wrapped in is a garment of our choosing, not someone else's cast-off or even worse, a garment that someone else

will make a profit from, if we wear it? To make sure that it is not something that we wear as camouflage, in order to fit in, in order to disguise who we truly are.

The first step we can take to choose what covers us, what characterises us, is to know ourselves, and then, to love ourselves. It is important to understand that the opposite of love is not hatred.

The opposite of love is apathy. If we are apathetic about who we really are, who we would like to be, about our beliefs, our wants, our vision, our future, we will end up wrapped in someone else's garment.

The second thing we can do to strengthen our choices, is to sleep with bread.

After the Second World War, there were lots of orphans. Terrified, lonely, they had lived through horrible things, and not surprisingly, they feared more of the same to come. One of the symptoms most of them shared, was that they just could not sleep at night. What helped them was to allow them to sleep with bread. If they could go to sleep holding a piece of bread, they knew that at least they would have something to eat when they woke up in the morning. So they went to sleep not just holding bread, but holding a promise, holding their best hopes for tomorrow.

As well as bread, we need food for our minds and our spirits. You in particular, being young, need food for the journey ahead. The bread you need to sleep with will be different for each one of you. You will have to discover what it is. What do you need to hold in your mind last thing at night, to encourage you, to give you both peace and hope?

Now my first two hopes for you have been for something you get, even though you have to find it for yourself: the right garment to cover you, and the right bread to feed you.

Next I hope for something you will give: a loud voice. This is not always welcome in school corridors, I know, but outside, in the world I live in, we need to hear from you.

You live more wholly in the 21<sup>st</sup> century than the rest of us. So please join in, and shape the debate in, and about, this century.

You don't have to wait to do this. There are already things you know more about than most public commentators. For example, the discussion around matric. If someone landed from Mars and read the newspapers assiduously, they would conclude that our matric was worthless. What do you think. Is matric easy? You and your teachers and your parents know this better than anyone else. There aren't two matrics – the one they write about in the papers, and yours. There's one matric. It's difficult.

Please speak up. Join the debate. Shape the public perception.

Did you get a good education, here at Jeppe girls? Well then, outside of the school, please speak up. There is a very nasty debate out there, that obscures the truth. This

debate divides education into two categories, private and state, and declares private to be best. Always. In all circumstances. But the truth is that within each category, there is so much difference, that each category is worthless. If all you know about a school is that it is a private school or a state school, you know nothing about that school. You know nothing about the learners, the teachers, the parents or the values in that school.

As well as using stupid and dangerous categories to discuss education, we use the wrong measures. We shouldn't just be using matric results. Although your results here are admirable. Did you know that the IEB matric had a Bachelor's pass rate of 85% in 2013, up from the previous year's 83%? But your Bachelor's, along with quite a few other state schools, was in the high nineties. At a much lower cost, and across a much wider range of learners.

Can we please celebrate our own excellence, and not wrap ourselves in the shoddy garments the media offer us?

We should be honest when we judge schools on marks, and we shouldn't only judge schools on marks. We should also judge schools on values. On citizenship. On tolerance. On dreams. On diversity.

When I say diversity, I am not just talking about racial diversity, although that is important. I am talking about diversity in where people live, diversity in beliefs, yes, diversity in what you wear, in your garments, diversity in the sacrifices you and your parents have to make to get you to school every day.

So my next hope for you is this:

I hope that as well as the right garment to cover you, the right bread to feed you, the right voice to speak up in, you will have the right people to surround you. It's often difficult for us as parents to accept, but your peers shape you more than we do, now. And you shape them.

I hope for you that once you have left school, if you look around you, and see that all your friends are the same, that your work colleagues or fellow students, people you worship with, people you admire and learn from, if you see that all of these people are the same as you: that they speak the same kind of English you do, that they live on the same amount of money as you do, that they see the world the same way as you do; that if you discover this sameness, this blandness, you will do something to correct it. That you will go out and spend time with people who are very different from you.

Because you live now in a diverse environment, you know that diversity is hard. Diversity can make you cry.

But let me assure you, lack of diversity is worse. Lack of diversity makes you narrow minded. You can't even see the other person's view, let alone empathise with it. All around the world, leaders must grapple with diversity: of religion, of language, and of course, the characteristic of your 21<sup>st</sup> century; income inequality. Even the English have

to get their heads around the idea that a whole lot of Scottish people don't like them very much, and would rather be neighbours than family.

You have an important asset, you have a competitive edge anywhere in the world, if you are comfortable with diversity.

If you are able to speak your mind into difference. If you are so well rooted in who you are that you can reach out, quite far, towards very different ideas, without falling over. But all of this requires work. It requires spending quite a lot of time outside of your comfort zone.

And when you go out of your comfort zone you will feel like a fish out of water. And sometimes you won't be able to breathe.

Never mind. Think about that very very first creature that moved from water onto land. Once upon a time, the whole earth was covered with water. First to break the surface of the water were the tips of the green plants. They changed the atmosphere, introducing oxygen. Up til then, only the water had been breathable. Then, once oxygen had made the air breathable, creatures who needed oxygen to live, began to make their way from water to land.

So when you feel like a fish out of water, think of that first out-of-the-water creature. Not a fish flung out of water, but a fish boldly going where no fish, no breathing creature, had gone before. And reshaping the history of living things on this planet.

If you are going to shape the 21<sup>st</sup> century, you can expect some breathless moments, and you will need to take some risks.

I hope that after you have left school, you will take the risk of reading.

As well as keeping in touch with different, challenging people who are all around us in South Africa, you need to keep in touch with interesting, funny, difficult people elsewhere, some of whom are now dead. The only way to hear their stories is by reading.

Did you know that after 25, if we don't keep up our reading skills they decline? Sure, turning 25 seems like 100 years away now, but it's not. And it won't help to start reading when you are 24 years 364 days and 59 seconds old. You have to start before that.

If your children are going to read, they need to see you reading. Of course you will read to them. Babies sit up at around 6 months old, so that they can sit on a lap, and look at picture books.

But as well as reading to your children, you need to set them the example of reading to yourself, by yourself.

Reading helps you know what the public debate is, so that you can join in. When (not if) you join in this debate, whether you join by speaking or by writing, or both, you will need to use the best words you can. Reading will give you those words.

It is my firm belief that matric setwork books in South Africa – and probably all over the world – are carefully, thoughtfully chosen to put young people off reading for life. Please be strong here. Do not be put off. It is okay to read books that are cheerful, even funny. There are funny books out there, and also serious books which are not depressing.

So, what I hope for you is that you will read, speak, write, not just contribute to but shape the public debate. The 21<sup>st</sup> century is your century. You can't just let it shape you. You have to shape back.

I hope that some of you will take on the most powerful shaping role there is in this world, and become teachers.

I hope you will take the risk of choosing. Of speaking up. Of listening to stories that are not your story.

It doesn't matter that everyone in this hall has different resources.

The writer Herman Charles Bosman was a Jeppe Boys Old Boy, a wonderfully talented man who had a hard life. His talent was not recognised, he clashed with the authorities, he spent time in jail, on Death Row, he sometimes lived on the streets. His poetry is less well known than his short stories, but tonight I want to read you part of a poem he wrote:

*God gave you roses, roses.  
To me he gave a piece of stinkblaar, with the blossom already decayed.  
But with the magic in my soul  
I turned that flower into a jewel, a crown, a star.  
And now you are sad, because he gave you only roses.*

Everyone, at some stage in their life, more than once in their life, ends up with a fistful of stinkblaar, when they had hoped for an armful of roses. Stinkblaar flowers aren't pretty and the leaves smell bad.

I hope that when you are left holding the stinkblaar, that you recognise the power, and the magic, in your soul. That you use it, to turn the sadness and pain you hold, into a star. A star to give us light, as well as lighting your path.

When you shine light, any kind of light, in the darkness, all kinds of darkness, I think you will be surprised by how happy this will make you.

**Gillian Godsell**