

Headmistress' Speech from Prize-Giving 2018

I have mentioned before that when I was young I attended a Catholic school for a while. At lunchtime there was sometimes a large pile of apples at the head of the table. Fruit wasn't very plentiful in those days and we used to try to smuggle them out under our jumpers. One day, one of the nuns made a note, and posted it on the apple tray: "Take only ONE. God is watching." At the other end of the table was a large pile of chocolate cookies and as I passed along I saw a child had written a note, "Take all you want. God is watching the apples."

I tell this story because it highlights some essential truths about the way children think and offers an insight into what we lose as we get older. For the past few years I have spoken here about creativity. I've frequently used Pablo Picasso's saying that 'all children are born artists; the problem is staying an artist when you grow up'. This story shows **five qualities** we lose on the road to adulthood: **a sense of wonder** (there is no doubt in this child's mind that a divine creator might exist); **critical thinking** (she showed a fine sense of analysis and logic); **imagination, playfulness; and daring.**

In various forms, these qualities inform all we do at Francis Holland. Out in the world, we have seen young people leaving university without the skills and aptitudes to be successful and confident in the age of technology and enterprise, and this failure of traditional education has inspired us radically to change the way we teach.

What is creativity and how does it work? Why do some people appear to find it easy to come up with brilliant, fresh ideas while others don't? Are you born with it, or can it be learnt? Well, we've discovered it's both.

We are a uniquely imaginative species. For humans, it's not a big deal. We do it all the time, from preparing a meal to texting a funny message to a friend. We might consider them mundane tasks but they still require us to imagine, to be creative. It's a fantastic natural gift, which, when cultivated properly, can enable us to achieve the most extraordinary things.

Picasso also said, 'Others have seen what is, and asked why. I have seen what could be and asked, why not?' Using our imagination enriches our minds and our lives. I have never met an artist of any type who isn't curious. The same goes for successful chefs, gardeners and sports coaches; anybody in fact who has a passion for their subject and a willingness to innovate. They have a brightness in their eyes that radiates energy. Being creative has that effect.

So how do we go about harnessing this innate talent? How can we generate those bold original ideas that could add value to our lives and maybe even to the wider world? And, more specifically, how do we trigger our imagination to conjure up the innovative thoughts that could be turned into something material and worthwhile?

Here at Francis Holland we started by developing the mindset which would enable our girls to believe in themselves, to be undaunted by limitations set on them by society, circumstance, gender or birth, to be brave, resilient and bold. Andrea in Year 8 told prospective parents at our open morning last week that FHS has taught her F-E-A-R has two meanings: Forget Everything And Run or Face Everything And RISE.

We have liberated the girls' self-belief through sport, outward bound expeditions, volunteering, art, music, singing, drama, debating. We have gone on to stretch the girls intellectually with projects, challenges, problem-solving, critical thinking and collaborative tasks. We hold talent shows and comedy nights. We have coding, robotics and computer science and STEM programmes. And now we are introducing Link Entrepreneurs, a team of five dynamic, highly successful creatives, who are providing business mentoring to our Sixth Form in the form of Innovation Sprints – an opportunity for the girls to use their imaginations and inventiveness to solve real-life industry problems culminating in a final pitch to our Entrepreneur panel.

A stunning example of this innovative spirit is seen in the four girls who travelled to NASA's Kennedy Space Center in Florida for the international space competition to build a lunar settlement. Beating young scientists from around the globe, the girls won the trophy after a gruelling three day final. Their ingenuity, scientific skill and creativity is reflected in the wonderful 50-slide presentation of their space community. These girls are set on becoming space engineers and computer scientist. Please congratulate Caroline, Joelle, Saffron and Sandrena on their amazing achievement

The School is buzzing with enthusiasm. Our Sixth Form enrichment programme offers girls courses in anything from art history to Mandarin, but also includes a financial awareness course, digital literacy and even Practical DIY. (There's a long waiting list for that course – and that's just the staff). We have built, with your generous help, two fabulous new buildings dedicated towards creative learning and creative enterprise. And meanwhile we have nurtured the spiritual and emotional life of our children. Conscious of the pressure on girls to be Little Miss Perfect, we have worked hard to encourage self-acceptance, to foster laughter and kindness, to build courage and perseverance. Our girls are daring, funny and enterprising. Our School has been transformed.

Everyone who visits instantly senses the dynamism, excitement and positivity in the air. Our girls are brimming with ideas and energy from the youngest to the oldest. In fact our smallest lead the way in thinking outside the box. I visited a junior class which was studying Antarctica. I asked one little girl, 'What keeps the polar bears warm?' 'Ooh,' she pondered, 'Is it the penguins?' Meanwhile in a Year 6 history class, the girls were asked what London was like in the early 18th century. 'It didn't exist back then,' one girl answered. 'Yes it did', explained the form teacher patiently, 'but London was a very different place before the industrial revolution.' 'Ah,' exclaimed the girl, 'was everything in black and white then?'

Taking intellectual risks, having a go, thinking differently. The best answers are seldom right or wrong but original. Our children have a wonderful freedom to be adventurous in their thinking and bold in their opinions. Age brings self-consciousness and robs us of our spontaneity. How can we hang on to this creative attitude, particularly in the face of the digital revolution which seems to render many of our roles redundant?

In many respects recent technological advances have been exciting and liberating: the internet has made it much easier to source materials and information, to meet like-minded individuals and create networks. And it has provided a cheap and easy platform for us to market our wares. But there's a downside too. Life has become ridiculously busy. We are overwhelmed with the need to attend to whatsapp messages, snap chats, our twitter feed, emails and status updates. We are living in a mad 24/7 wired world which is demanding and

relentless. And this is before the march of the robots. The wonderful advances in artificial intelligence which are bringing such amazing breakthroughs in medicine and surgery, for example, will also mean the supplanting of many humans by the gentle hum of a machine.

Our best response will be to do the one thing that no computer in the world can manage, which is to **use our imagination**. It is by being creative that we are likely to find contentment and purpose in our digitised age. Not only happiness but a living is the product. In the workplace, creativity will be increasingly highly prized and well remunerated. But there's more to it than that. The very act of making and creating is deeply satisfying, life-affirming and rewarding. Nothing else can make you feel as truly alive and connected to the physical world and bringing your ideas to life. It is, I suppose, the ultimate affirmation of our humanness.

Sadly our education system in the UK has taken a step backwards. Its relentless focus on assessment, results, fact-learning and regurgitation pegs us back into a Victorian system of filling an empty vessel rather than lighting a fire. It is hopelessly outdated and unfit for purpose. Most schools don't dare to jump the tracks and imagine a different journey – another, radical, way to educate children. Instead they are forever shunting children along to the end of the line which they call A levels or university. How viable is this one-size-fits all model for a generation which is growing up using technology to curate their lives and interests? To persist with a linear system of top-down education is like putting a finger in the digital dam – a dam about to bust with the millions of young people demanding bespoke learning.

But happily there is another revolution taking place alongside the digital one. It is the extraordinary rise of innovative, aspiring enterprises driven by the millions of highly motivated, creative people who can conceive ideas of value and know how to realise them. And we are on the crest of the wave. The destination for our girls is not university but LIFE – a productive life, a good life and a happy life. And for most of our girls sitting here tonight, that will mean being part of this vast wave of entrepreneurs, of artisans, craftsmen, small collectives, start-ups and pop-ups which will be at the heart of our country's victory over the doomsayers of Brexit. It is also an important and powerful form of self-expression. Why else would despotic dictators lock up poets and extremists destroy art? They are frightened by ideas that oppose theirs, and threatened by those who can express them. Creativity matters. Now more than ever.

So to our Sixth Form leavers I say this: *we live in a world full of urgent problems, climate change, terrorism and poverty to name but three. They are obstacles we can only overcome by using our brains and our imagination – when we are thinking like artists and not behaving like animals. We are all artists. We just have to believe it. Nearly all successful people begin with two beliefs: the future can be better than the present, and I have the power to make it so. Go and imagine. Go and make a difference.*