

# Making the Ordinary Come Alive

I've been on school boards for eleven years, eight of them here at Oakhill. In that time I've seen some interesting stuff come and go, some heart-breaking stuff too but fortunately, mostly, liberating, exhilarating stuff ... like celebrations of excellence and music concerts and hard fought hockey victories and defeats and, luckily for me, three valediction ceremonies which were probably my favourite three nights of twenty plus years of school.

So what has it been about? What lessons learned, what joy of learning have I been through? Mostly, it seems to me, it's all about balance ...between work and play, between ambition and coasting along, between winning and losing ... and then some questions around, well, what is work and what is play? Where does one begin and the other end? What is ambition? What is winning? Is it good if one person wins and everyone else loses, or can we all win? Should we all win? And then the battle between good and bad ... So ...

## **Lesson One : Schools are for children, and all children have magic within them.**

I truly think that ...and it's the first lesson I learned when I got involved at a school for children with "learning difficulties". There were no ivy covered walls, no history embedded in colonial times, no rolling lawns and no uber competitive parents boasting about little Joe's latest gymnastics triumph. There were just prefab classrooms, wonderful teachers and happy, noisy children, many of them getting a school

lifeline, despite their young ages – itself a lesson, a warning of things going wrong.

That experience and this experience here at Oakhill have reinforced for me that schools are about and for children, where they can discover their magic within. They are places to learn and imagine and create and think and stumble and fall and then get on with things again. They're places where friendships are forged and battles fought and lessons learned and responsibility taken, but mostly they are places where children find **their** purpose, and where great headmasters and teachers help them prepare for **their lives** after school. Like those sitting here, Shane and the teachers at Oakhill, who I thank on behalf you all of you again!

Importantly, this first lesson applies to all children. And yet ...

Here's a snapshot from Somalia, when a United Nations worker asked a child what she wanted to be when she grew up. Her response: I have no future. My schooling days are over. Refugee children only get primary school education ... and so become children lost, without hope. All children should have the opportunity to build a life for themselves. Yet we in this country, where we don't have a war, don't offer this, and there is trouble coming if we don't fix it. We have shocking inequality and we suffer the consequences it brings. The permanent solution to eradicating poverty and inequality is not in quotas and social grants and grandstanding politics, but in education, and it's our shame that we continue to betray so many of our children.

## **Lesson two: schools have – or should - become places of safety**

Children need the right environment to unlock their potential ... Increasingly, schools have become havens of safety; they must nurture and protect, they must be places where children can escape if they need to from dysfunctional family lives and their fear of missing out, and they need to escape from their parents' fear of missing out and keeping up with the Kardashians and other weird creations of the celebrity obsessed – FOMO – reality age, they need to get away from online violence and pornography and internet trolls and so it goes ...more than ever children need a place where people care unconditionally about them, and more than ever, schools are becoming those places.

### **Lesson Three: Schools must celebrate the humanities and the sciences**

“I always thought of myself as a humanities kind of person as a kid, but I liked electronics” Steve Jobs told Walter Isaacson when he was writing his biography. “Then, I read something about the importance of people who could stand at the intersection of humanities and sciences and I decided that’s what I wanted to do”. It made him the most successful innovator of our time. He understood what would make people’s lives easier, he understood lifestyle, and he understood people liked cool. He used science and technology and fused it with art and design and built a range of life changing products and in the process built the iconic firm of the last decade.

Put another way, Columbia University’s Allan Brinkley said “Science and technology ... teach us what we can do .... (they) aspire to clean, clear answers to problems. Humanistic thinking ... can help us understand

what we should do ... (it) addresses ambiguity, doubt and skepticism, essential underpinnings in a complex and diverse society and a turbulent world.

It's important that schools help children find the balance, their balance, collectively if not always individually. Our children need to make sense of the information bombardment they experience every day, a brash, open-to-all-media space that's no longer regulated by the old world rules of journalism or public conversation... are both sides covered, is it in the public interest, are society's norms and values respected.

Our children need to be at the intersection of science and the humanities because then they will be able to try and solve global warming, and inequality, and the threat of the so-called Islamic State, and the relentless destruction of fauna and flora ... and solving each of these issues concerns morality and ethics, about what is intuitively right and wrong, about what will work for all and not just some ... and they need to have the skills to execute what is right. Schools need to be places of thinking, where children work out where to go before they work out how to get there.

#### **Lesson four: schools must celebrate the ordinary as well as the exceptional**

This is not necessarily what it seems at face value, although that might not be a bad thing. In our push for "the next level", we keep raising the anxiety thermometer ... expectations climb, entitlement is embedded, and stress spirals ... We are always looking for the ultimate high, pushing harder and harder lest we lose our place in the spotlight ... but

as we teach at Oakhill, there are always consequences ... 18 year olds suffering burnout are the fastest growing patient category with a doctor in a school town not far from here. We need to find balance, we need to make, as William Martin says, the ordinary come alive.

*Do not ask your children  
to strive for extraordinary lives.  
Such striving may seem admirable,  
but it is a way of foolishness.  
Help them instead to find the wonder  
and the marvel of an ordinary life.  
Show them the joy of tasting  
tomatoes, apples, and pears.  
Show them how to cry  
when pets and people die.  
Show them the infinite pleasure  
in the touch of a hand.  
And make the ordinary come alive for them.  
The extraordinary will take care of itself.*

### **Lesson 5: Schools are about being the best ... and being good**

Schools are about each child doing their best and being their best, which is a noble pursuit. The extraordinary mostly takes extraordinary effort, and ambition drives people to be better, to better themselves, it gets people out of bed, it gets people to achieve, to ... yes, get to their next level ... in their time, in their way. And doing the best you can means making dreams and visions come true ... dreams without execution is just hallucination.

As much as being the best is important, so too is being good, and doing good. Good is not best and we need good as much as we need best. Liberal, progressive societies need to embrace values that have been around for thousands of years ... we cannot build free societies, free of racism, of sexism, of cruelty and poverty, without respect, and trust, and integrity. The Oakhill way is built on these values and they underpin, consciously or unconsciously, the excellence we celebrate today.

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