

Looking Backwards into the Future



Mr. Chairman, Honoured Guest, Members of the Board of Trustees, Parents, Members of the Faculty and students, welcome to this our Prize Giving for the academic year 2007 – 2008.

On an evening such as this we are gathered to celebrate the achievements of our students in the year that is now passed. We look backwards to applaud effort, determination and dedication all in a time that is not terribly far behind us at all but which is nonetheless 'the past'. So this evening is a retrospective and a celebration of things done well.

This evening, of course, we hope that the students will consider that, though we look to the past, we are also mindful of its relevance for our future action and commitment. So, I suppose you could say that my brief address to you this evening is about "Looking Backwards into The Future".

In his collection of twelve poems which is titled 'Leaves of Grass' the American poet Walt Whitman wrote:

To think of time—of all that retrospection!

To think of to-day, and the ages continued henceforward!

Have you guess'd you yourself would not continue?

Have you dreaded these earth-beetles?

Have you fear'd the future would be nothing to you?

Is to-day nothing? Is the beginningless past nothing?

If the future is nothing, they are just as surely nothing.

What he is saying is that the future is what gives a significance to our past and present actions. If there is no investment in the future then both present and past are equally meaningless. It is what we **seek** to do that gives a rationale for what we do now and what we have done whether it be for last year or many years before that.

This is a fine school! I have often remarked that this is the case when I have spoken to parents at gatherings such as this or when I have had the opportunity to speak with faculty or with students in assemblies. Our achievements each and every year are legion. This year, in particular, we are **extremely** proud that eleven students at Saltus Grammar School have earned the designation of AP Scholar in recognition of their exceptional achievement in the college-level Advanced Placement Exams. Two of these students have been designated as Bermuda National Scholars for their outstanding performance having earned an average of 4 on a five point scale in four or more examinations. National Scholar Awards are available only in the United States, in Canada, and here in Bermuda in recognition of our school's long and successful relationship with the College Board and the Advanced Placement programme.

Our GCSE results for the past twenty years have been absolutely secure and consistent. Though the number of students achieving five or more grades of C or higher has quite naturally fluctuated with each passing year, the **average** for our students over the twenty year period has been a very creditable 85% achieving 5 or more grades at C or higher. This is all the more noteworthy for **all students** at the conclusion of their two year GCSE programme are entered for examination since we hold that it is important for **each individual** to have the **opportunity** to achieve and to receive certification which is commensurate with his or her capacity. In addition to our academic achievements, opportunities abound within the school in drama, in debate, in sport and in community undertakings. This year, students have travelled to Peru, to France and to Costa Rica; they have competed in international public school debating competition in Canada; we have seen dramatic productions as varied as the outrageously 'subversive' 'Teechers' and the youthfully classical Shakespeare and we look forward to Buggy Malone next

week. I trust that you have already bought your tickets for this! In addition, in our music programme, our bands and orchestras go from strength to strength.

When they leave us, our Graduate Year students embark on college and university careers in Canada in The United States and in the United Kingdom. There is a diversity in the destinations for some attend two years colleges while others enter ivy-league universities. Wherever they may be, we celebrate each individual achievement.

I am sometimes asked whether I am 'concerned' that students elect to leave us in the lower years. Naturally, I would that they might have remained with us, but we are enormously proud of their achievements even here, for the work they do in Saltus gains them admission to highly competitive schools internationally. The feedback that we receive from admitting schools tells us that we fit our students well for their chosen paths. This is a source of great pride - for Saltus was the beginning. I could, of course, speak at length and in greater detail but my intent is simply to highlight the quality of this very special school and the opportunity which it offers for these students – for your sons and daughters.

This is a fine school! My association with Saltus allows me to make that statement with absolute conviction. I and the few longest serving members of the faculty of this school have the perspective that allows us to see just how far this school has come in over thirty years.

At that time, the school was much smaller and was all male. There were no computers anywhere in the school, there were only two air conditioning units in the secondary department –then called the Senior School. Classrooms, certainly at the senior level had bare wooden floors, lockers were metal and severely in need of repair. There was no secondary gymnasium. Now, we need only look around and see how much the years have changed Saltus. Our facilities are vastly improved, we have a technology provision second to none, our curriculum is much wider and our school community and culture is so much more varied and so much the richer.

And yet, by the same token, the school is **unchanged** for its values are as clear now as they were then and while there was no mission statement which sought to capture the ethos of Saltus we knew that our role was to develop students of quality and capacity and to make it possible for them to advance in life and realize their aspirations and hopes. We sought then, as now, to offer each student an **opportunity** for achievement and personal growth.

Schools grow, schools develop, but the responsibilities of schools never change. I am sometimes advised by parents and others who often have little connection to our school community, that Saltus is utterly unlike the school of many years ago. Standards and values are slipping and there is a view which suggests in the words of Irish poet W.B. Yeats:

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...*

It may help to note that, when the Headmaster who engaged me in 1978, reported on his impressions of the school upon his arrival in 1968 he "... remarked on the bottom heavy nature of the school, as boys of about 14 years (and usually some of those of above average intelligence,) left to go abroad; despite this, however, when our 'O' level results were compared with other schools they were a comparative success..."

The concerns that absorbed the attention of the school's administrators then were, as they are now, issues of staffing, facilities readiness, the cost of upkeep, the inflation in the fee required to meet the school's planned progression and growth. These are the concerns of the administration of today. What is remarkable is that against the background of these perennial concerns there has always been a determination to move the school forward and ensure that it remains relevant. To lead and not to follow.

Last year, indeed the last three years, have been a period of particular focus and dedication within the school. At all levels, we reviewed the life of Saltus. We focused and reflected honestly on the School's Mission and Vision, its Academic programme, its

Leadership and Resources, its relationship with and involvement in the wider community, its admissions policies and rationale, its Governance, its Physical Plant and perhaps most importantly of all its commitment to Sustained improvement. What we have been doing is to look to the way in which we perform and we took counsel on how we might apply that reflection to our future undertakings. We have done what we hope each students acknowledged here tonight will do. We have worked hard to achieve, we have judged our performance honestly and openly; we asked that others reviewed what we said of ourselves and we will use that awareness to plan for the future. Without that future focus what we do today, what we did yesterday will have little relevance.

The closing remarks in the published Final Report, which was compiled by the visiting Canadian Educational Standards team, offers the following observation about our school:

It is clear ... that there is a commitment to school improvement throughout much of the organization. Staff care deeply about their school and there is a great deal of pride about what the Saltus experience stands for. Engaging in the CESI review and accreditation process is evidence that the school wants to measure itself against a rigorous set of standards and embark upon the journey of continuous improvement.

This characteristic alone places Saltus amongst the great schools

because any school that does not recognize the need to improve is in danger of becoming irrelevant in today's fast-changing educational environment.

It is the commitment to sustained improvement which is the value that we shall take from our recent accreditation. To receive the recognition and to join those schools of quality which have themselves undergone the process is not the end but a constructive beginning to what lies yet to be addressed.

I introduced my remarks this evening by stating somewhat paradoxically perhaps that I was looking backwards to the future. I ask that each student acknowledged here this evening might indulge in the same reflective process and draw the requisite lesson from such reflection to inform their future choices and commitment to improvement.

In closing I will offer you a simple African proverb:

Tomorrow belongs to the people who plan for it today.

I wish you luck and I offer each one of you my congratulations for your success and my encouragement for the year that is yet to come. Use it well for it will give meaning to all that you have done and for which you are applauded this evening.

N.J.G. Kermode
November 6, 2008

Headmaster's address – Prize Giving 2008