

Don't Ask for Easy Assembly

This morning I would like to start with a short video. The speaker you will hear is called Kara Lawson. She is the Head Coach for women's basketball at Duke University in America. As part of their training, at the end of a session, Kara gives her team a short talk.

Here is a recording of a recent talk she gave: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oDzfZOfnki4>

Interesting? I love the message. She gives it to her team straight. Not only will you never get it easy, you shouldn't want it easy. There's a lot of cultural baggage that promotes the cult of easy. We all know the phrase, 'Take it easy', or the compliment 'easy-going'.

I would very much like you to take on board Kara Lawson's message that 'the easy bus' is never coming. Instead, you have to work on handling hard better. That could sound like a daunting, harsh message. On the contrary. Dealing with things that are hard, facing and overcoming challenge, managing complexity, refusing to be intimidated, pushing back at adversity and even seeking it – these have always been at the heart of what we do here.

That is why we take you above and beyond the exam board syllabus to discover what intellectual heights you can achieve. That is why we value sport, because it is on the playing fields that you come under pressure and must discover a new way – alongside your teammates – to get better and refuse the easy. That is why the CCF and DofE and Outdoor Education programmes exist. And add Music, and Drama and Art. In all of these areas we challenge you to deal with the difficult better. This is what is called a holistic education.

And as Kara Lawson says – when you do start to manage the difficult better, do you know what we are going to do? We are going to make it harder. That is because we don't want things to be easier. We want things to be better.

Working harder to achieve better outcomes is a key element of success. But it is possible to do that with a degree of style. There is a word that has entered the Merchant Taylors' language that best describes this. That word is sprezzatura. The newer members of the school may be unfamiliar with it. That is to be expected – it is a word taken from an obscure book called *The Book of the Courtier*, by an Italian man called Castiglione. It was written about 500 years ago and was a guide to how to shine at a royal court.

The secret was to have sprezzatura. That is defined as, "an easy skill in accomplishing difficult actions which hides the conscious effort that went into them". This a gentlemanly quality – to do difficult things with an easy grace that does not show the effort that went into the mastery of the skill, whatever it is. A kind of casual brilliance.

That is the elegant way of taking on difficult and challenging things – to master them and overcome them with such style that you make the hard look easy. And then you aren't interested in easy things – just making it look easy.

That takes me to another clip I would like to share with you. You may have come across the podcast *The Rest is History*. It is the highest ranked UK history podcast and in the top 10 in the US charts. Recently, they had an episode on Independent schools, called the History of Hogwarts. In it, they gave some time to talk about our school. In fact, they were very complimentary and even (somehow) picked up on a word you will know. This is a short extract:

Pod Cast

Our first Head Master, Richard Mulcaster, was the educational mastermind behind the innovative education Merchant Taylors' has offered since 1561. That holistic education was there to have an

impact. It was meant to give pupils here the breadth of experience that would excite them intellectually, but also provide the sort of challenges that allow them to reject the easy and overcome the difficult, perhaps with a degree of flair and style.

It all comes together into a seamless whole. A holistic education provides breadth and challenge. That encourages sprezzatura. That then creates a context in which we aren't waiting around for the easy bus that is never going to come. In fact, we don't want the easy bus. We want to handle challenge by dealing with it better. And that way we keep growing, keep getting better and keep discovering new interests and new opportunities and above all new challenges. A challenge is not a problem to worry about – it is a stimulus to action.

Here is an extract from a poem that seems to me to capture that thought.

Song of the Open Road – Walt Whitman

Afoot and light-hearted I take to the open road,
Healthy, free, the world before me,
The long brown path before me leading wherever I choose.

Henceforth I ask not good-fortune, I myself am good-fortune,
Henceforth I whimper no more, postpone no more, need nothing,
Done with indoor complaints, libraries, querulous criticisms,
Strong and content I travel the open road.

From this hour I ordain myself loos'd of limits and imaginary lines,
Going where I wish, my own master total and absolute,
Listening to others, considering well what they say,
Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.

I inhale great draughts of space,
The east and the west are mine, and the north and the south are mine.
I am larger, better than I thought,
I did not know I held so much goodness.

A final thought. In a world where little is easy, there are places where nothing is. Here I think of the on-going conflict in Israel and Gaza. I have no glib answers and you would not thank me for trying to offer them. But I do think we should address how the conflict there affects us here.

Now, more than ever, we need to see each individual as just that – an individual - and not in terms of their race, religion or nationality. Our focus now is purely on the needs of that individual. Some members of our community are frightened, some are angry, many are both. We will need to guard against external conflicts entering our own school.

It is important to understand that no-one should feel that they have to take a side. Instead, let us embrace nuance. It is possible to feel for everyone caught up in this situation. Our philosophy of life should be built upon the idea of both/and, rather than either/or.

Finally, let us be sophisticated enough to hold two ideas. If someone is outraged at the violence that some have had inflicted upon them, that should not mean they cannot see the suffering of others. If someone is outraged at the suffering of some, that does not excuse violence to another. Hold both thoughts.

Above all, let us be kind to each other.