

John Keats, uncertainty and Easter

John Keats was one of our greatest poets, a master of rich and sensuous language. He died in 1821, tragically young at just 25, but left a body of work that will never die, so long as humans read and can feel. Here is how he opens his Ode to a Grecian Urn, speaking to a two thousand year old vase:

“Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time,”

The six odes that John Keats wrote in 1820 are his greatest achievement but he is also remembered for his letters, written to his brothers and to the woman he loved, Frances Brawne. These ideas then filtered through into his poetry – consider this thought, written in a letter:

"I am certain of nothing but the holiness of the Heart's affections and the truth of Imagination – What the imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth – whether it existed before or not."

Consider the similarity to the final lines of Ode to a Grecian Urn, where he speaks directly to the ancient vase:

“When old age shall this generation waste,
Thou shalt remain, in midst of other woe
Than ours, a friend to man, to whom thou say'st,
"Beauty is truth, truth beauty" - that is all

Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.”

Another important idea that Keats introduced in a letter, written in 1817 to his brothers, was Negative Capability.

This he defined as a poetic state in which we are "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason ...[Being] content with half knowledge". I think this is an immensely powerful idea that I would like to commend to you this morning.

It will help you to be more successful in your endeavours. And if you ever find yourself in a position of authority and responsibility, it will guide and support you. Let me explain what I mean. After all, it sounds like an odd thing for the Headmaster of an academic school like Merchant Taylors' to say that we should have the capacity to live with uncertainty, mystery, and doubt, without any “irritable reaching after fact and reason.” Don't we thrive on reaching after fact and reason? Most assuredly, we do value fact and reason.

Many of you will have spent some of the Easter holiday preparing for important exams in which your success will depend precisely upon “reaching after fact and reason”.

But we also value creativity, poetics, and artistry. And our ability to develop knowledge and to engage in rational thought is enhanced when we can think creatively, when we can cultivate our negative capability. So how does a capacity for uncertainty aid in the quest for knowledge? Well, uncertainty and science are not alien to each other. Uncertainty is built into quantum theory – it’s in the equations, just ask Heisenberg. But more broadly, it is at the heart of scientific enquiry.

A good example of the latter is Barbara McClintock, a plant geneticist, active from the 1920s to her death in the early 1980s. In the early 1950s, McClintock had stopped trying to publish her research on genetic regulation because other scientists at the time were skeptical of her conclusions. McClintock’s findings were substantially different from those of her contemporaries. When asked about how she was able to develop such unique scientific conclusions, McClintock said that the keys for her were to have (5) “the time to look and the patience to hear what the material has to say to you.”

McClintock approached questions about the natural world with a strong degree of (6) negative capability. She was open to what she might learn, she cultivated her capacity for uncertainty, and she learned a lot.

Her research findings were later confirmed and acknowledged by other scientists, and she was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1983.

And here’s where we get to the point that I find particularly inspirational. John Keats, writing poetry in the early 19th century, and Barbara McClintock, studying corn genetics in the early 20th century, have this in common: they found hope, and truth, and beauty in the practice of negative capability, in listening patiently, having a certain level of comfort with uncertainty, and in recognizing that what *appears* to be given, is not necessarily so.

And how can negative capability help with leadership? If, as a leader, one approaches every complex situation with a pre-determined set of ideas about how things should be done, if one is locked into a yes/no mindset, one is simply not flexible enough to lead well. You need to be able to hold uncertainty in your mind, to live with uncertainty, mystery, and doubt, without any “irritable reaching after fact and reason.”

If you can grasp this admittedly difficult concept you will have the secret of creativity, the secret of poetry, the secret of innovation, the secret of science and the secret of leadership. You will also enhance your chances of success, even in exam situations, where fact and reason do rule supreme.

So I urge you to be prepared to live with, even embrace uncertainty. In thinking about this assembly, I found that although I started with Keats, what I wanted to make my true focus this morning was precisely that uncertainty.

Because nothing could be more appropriate, or more hopeful, in this time of year, when we have just marked the Christian festival of Easter. The story of Easter reminds us that, just as uncertainty is at the heart of scientific enquiry, so it is at the heart of faith.

Easter, the most important Christian festival, has much hope to offer those who wait in uncertainty, wondering what will come. Just under 2000 years ago, a group of friends and disciples gathered around a cross and watched the most important person they had ever met die in front of them. On a Friday long ago, it must have seemed that the world had come to an end. And that is where the story should have ended. But the followers of Jesus, knowing that something terrible had happened, waited. They waited in uncertainty for three days.

And they tell us that they were rewarded by a resurrection, a triumph over death and the greatest vindication of hope the world has ever known.

So although we look forward, uncertain, perhaps a little fearful of what the future might bring, let us take hope from the ideas of John Keats. To those that wait, whether in faith, in scientific enquiry or in creativity, wonderful things are in store. Just as we can be let down or bruised by experience, so too we can be surprised by joy and uplifted by insights.

So, as a little antidote to all the uncertainty you are managing, and as a wonderfully peaceful start to a busy term, in which we face challenges and tests both known and as yet unknown, let's finish where we started - with Keats – and the opening lines of another Keats' poem.

The poem is called "Endymion". Enjoy the ideas behind it but also enjoy the music of the language and the sense of peace it can bring:

A thing of beauty is a joy for ever:
Its loveliness increases; it will never
Pass into nothingness; but still will keep
A bower quiet for us, and a sleep
Full of sweet dreams, and health, and quiet breathing.

I hope that you had a wonderful Easter break and are ready to return to school full of enthusiasm, energy and with the capacity to hold and even celebrate the uncertainties of life.