

Start of Year Assembly Sept 2019

Welcome to you all. I hope that you had a wonderfully relaxing and refreshing break. To those who join us for the first time today, whether in the Thirds, the Fourths, or the Sixth Form, I offer the warmest welcome. I hope you will have a wonderful time in the years ahead, and I am sure you will bring fresh talent and enthusiasm to the school.

This morning, I would like to reflect on the successes we have enjoyed as a school and look forward to the year ahead. There is little doubt that last year ranks as one of our best ever. We hit the heights in sport and academic achievement. The GCSE and A-level results were superb and place us amongst the best schools in the country. This gives us a tremendous springboard from which to approach the year ahead. We should be proud of all that we have achieved, and excited about what we will do next.

One of the ways we might find a path forward is to examine ourselves and our fundamental beliefs. After all, the future consists of an almost limitless set of choices and opportunities. The secret of success lies in the choices we make between those opportunities, and our choices are best guided by our sense of ourselves and what we want. That is true of each of us, and it is true of our school as a whole. May I suggest that we all use some of the wisdom accumulated by our first Head Master, Richard Mulcaster, in shaping that future?

Richard Mulcaster was born around 1531, and died in 1611 at the ripe old age of 80. In addition to being the first headmaster of Merchant Taylor's School, Richard Mulcaster also served as a clergyman and an MP. His life overlaps with that of Shakespeare's, and it is thought that Shakespeare poked fun at Mulcaster by using him as the inspiration for a character in the play *Love's Labours Lost*. Mulcaster may have inspired the character of Holofernes, a foolish schoolmaster babbling Latin. However, in his new school, he was revered as a teacher, and he educated both Edmund Spenser, one of our greatest poets, and Lancelot Andrewes, the man who gave us the King James' Bible. Lancelot Andrewes respected Mulcaster so much that Andrewes hung his portrait above the door to his study. In addition, Mulcaster wrote two books. The first, *Positions*, was published in 1581. It detailed Mulcaster's vision of a good education, or as Mulcaster put it on the title page: 'Wherin those primitive circumstances be examined, which are necessarie for the training up of children, either for skill in their books, or health in their bodie.' The second, *Elementarie*, was published in 1582. It developed his thoughts on education, especially the teaching of English, or as Mulcaster put it: 'Which entreateth chiefe of the right writing of our English tung.' At the end of the book, Mulcaster listed 8000 'hard words'. The idea was not to define these words but to try to standardise their spelling. In doing so, Mulcaster produced what may be considered the first English dictionary. He also argued for the introduction of sport into the standard school curriculum - a radical idea at the time.

However, it was in his first book, *Positions*, that Mulcaster lays out the clearest picture of what he considers a good education. Perhaps we have some thing we can take from it today. Remember, this was a time when education mostly consisted of rote learning and beatings.

The first surprise is the description Mulcaster gives to a good school. He calls them 'Treasuries of learning...' I like that image of intellectual wealth suggested by 'treasuries', as well as the sense of security that it presents. He adds that schools are 'Storehouses of humanity...' - a hoarding together of all that is best in people. But they are more than just holders of wisdom. Schools are 'The sources of knowledge and wisdom...' We are the

fountainhead as well as the storers of all that is best. For this reason, a good school is ‘The choice of promising scholars...’ Well, you are all promising scholars and Merchant Taylors’ School is pleased that you continue to choose us.

When Mulcaster put together the curriculum that would be taught to the first generations of MTS pupils, in whose footsteps you tread, he thought hard about how to shape it. Mulcaster sums up his conclusion in a wonderfully poised sentence. An education at MTS is based upon four precepts: ‘Nature to lead it, reason to back it, custom to commend it and experience to approve it...’ It is worth unpacking what this might mean. Education should be led by nature. That is it should fit with how people *are* rather than how they *should be*. We start with our basic natures. Then we add reason to underpin our instincts – the mind and rationality give structure and rigour. A good education should then be founded upon what we know has worked in the past – custom, and be continually assessed against current performance – experience. A brilliant combination of wisdom, bravery, and pragmatism which I hope we live up to in our daily practice today.

Given that Mulcaster only knew a single Tudor hall in a cramped lane in the centre of a smoky and filthy city, he would be pleased to see where the school is located now. At the time, his wish - ‘I wish that schools were planted near to the fields, with little or no restriction in the matter of space...’ was an impossible dream. He would be delighted with the view out of our windows today.

He has demands to make upon you, the pupils. Mulcaster makes it clear that ‘Scholars cannot rest satisfied with little...’ You have to be intellectually and academically ambitious for yourself. You cannot get by with the minimum and be satisfied with little. But Mulcaster does not demand that you spend every hour bent over your studies - ‘Learning must have leisure...’ You need other interests and activities to develop yourself. Play is as important as any other thing that you do. And a good school needs to feed that by providing opportunities to try new things - ‘For [in a good school] the variety is very great...’

Just as Mulcaster asked much of his pupils, so he pushed for more from his teachers. The teaching at a good school is based upon the teachers having a deep understanding of those they teach. He said: ‘Natural capacities once being observed, must be followed with diligence, increased by good method and encouraged by sympathy.’ This is radical. Everything starts with the teachers’ understanding of the pupils’ talents. Then the teacher must ensure that they are practised with diligence. Next the natural abilities are improved by the teachers’ guidance, and underpinning it all is sympathetic encouragement. Not fear. Not rote learning. Not cramming with facts. Sympathy, encouragement, good practice, diligence and care for the pupil. Radical stuff – even now and especially then.

This is not easy to do. Please never underestimate how hard your teachers work on your behalf. They will deploy huge reserves of learning, wisdom, care and attention to you in the year ahead. Please meet them more than halfway in your appreciation of their work. Mulcaster knew what the impact of a good school could be, and what it cost from those who work in it: ‘The good that cometh by schools is infinite; the qualities required in the teacher are many and great...’

So we begin this year by returning to the words that laid the foundations for the school back in 1561. They are as resonant and wise today as they were then. I hope they have inspired both pupils and teacher alike to unite in the wonderful opportunities and discoveries that lie ahead of us in the shining new year to come. Mulcaster gives us all a challenge. For the pupils it is this: ‘Scholars cannot rest satisfied with little...’ For the teachers he has another

telling comment: ‘Our profession is certainly more arduous than most; but on the other hand, not many have such opportunities of doing good service.’

In conclusion, to add to Mulcaster’s words, I would like to end by reminding you of a word he probably didn’t know, although it was around at his time. I hope he would have cheerfully added it to his list of hard words. It has become something of a Merchant Taylors’ word and it sums up what I would wish for you: sprezzatura – understated brilliance.