

Speech Graduation June 2013

Our graduates today are taking a huge step towards independence in a complex world. That world can be summed up by the following paraphrase of the words of the Dalai Lama:

We have bigger houses but smaller families;
More conveniences, but less time;
We have more degrees, but less common sense;
More knowledge, but less judgement;
More experts, but more problems;
These are times of fast foods, but slow digestion;
Times of tall men who are short of character;
Steep profits, but shallow relationships.
It's a time when there is much in the window,
But little in the room.

The truth is that I don't think there has ever been an easy age in which to live. In a small homage to all the parents - and grandparents - here tonight, I would like to impress on you, Year 13, how you can learn a great deal from the experiences of your parents and learn from what they have done and not just from what they tell you to do.

In your lives to come I hope you'll show determination in the face of threat or challenge. In the second world war my own parents faced the threat of death every day of their lives having taken the decision not to leave London for the relative safety of the countryside, but to continue - my father as a trainee doctor and my mother as a nurse - in the London hospital in the east of the capital, precisely one of the areas targeted by Hitler for heavy bombardment.

My own mother's routine involved a relentless pattern of 8 hours work followed by 8 hours rest then another 8 hours work. My father worked and studied during the day and did voluntary duty on fire watch on the roof of the same hospital at night. From all accounts they showed such determination that for them defeat was not an option. Such was my mother's spirit that one night, walking back to work with my father from a rare visit to a bar and proudly wearing a new coat they heard the terrifying hum of a V1 flying bomb overhead. The V1 was a pilotless, mini-airplane which was packed with explosive. It would run out of fuel over London and fall to earth where it would explode. When this particular V1's engine stopped directly above them my father threw himself to the floor and put his hands over his head while my mother stood defiantly, a house exploding from the impact close by. When my father picked himself up from the road my mother said, 'Did you think I'd let Hitler ruin my new coat?'

The truth is that hardships help you become strong and stand up to challenges. Inevitably you will face difficulties in your lives and I hope you will have the strength and ability to overcome them. Life is unforgiving but it is the strong who earn respect. You might think my mother was foolish to risk her life, but for her that coat was a symbol of resistance.

You will make mistakes. We all do. A mistake my mother was not allowed to forget also came during those same days of being bombarded in London when all lights had to be extinguished so as not to help the German bombers overhead. Walking in total darkness across the courtyard of the hospital one night she tripped over something warm and cylindrical which sent her tumbling to the floor, spoiling her uniform. She quickly raised the alarm that there was an unexploded bomb. Fortunately for her, some wardens arrived before the whole hospital was evacuated

and used their torches to identify a stone hot water bottle which must have fallen from a trolley.

My hope is that you will be able to learn from your mistakes and not be so proud that you cannot laugh at yourself.

Let me use my mother's love of clothes again to illustrate the importance of taking your responsibilities seriously. If we jump forward to a night in December 1962 your headteacher was a young boy about the age of our Year 6 pupils here tonight travelling with his parents and brothers back home after a day with his cousins close to London. It was a cold, foggy night and in the days before motorways, journeys were often long and slow. That night we rounded a bend to see a bus which had skidded off the road with its nose in a ditch and its back in the air. We were one of the first cars on the scene and the occupants of the bus, all men, were leaving the vehicle and calling for help. My parents told my brothers and me to wait in the car, took the medical bag my father always carried with him and went to help.

My brothers and I saw how they talked to people and then entered the wrecked bus. Eventually the police and an ambulance arrived and they gave something to my father who again entered the bus. Then my mother, dressed up smartly for the day, took off her shoes and coat and crawled into the ditch underneath the bus. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was cold, muddy and wet down there. She would ruin her dress.

Eventually, a man was carried out of the bus and put in the ambulance which drove off quickly. My parents came back to the car and I saw that my mother's dress was stained and ruined. It was the last thing on her mind that night. We drove home in silence.

Over the next two days the newspapers were full of the story of how a young player called Duggie McMillan would never play again because he had lost a leg when the club's coach had crashed on the way home from a game against West Ham. Later on, we received a visit from the chairman of Sheffield Wednesday Football Club to make my parents honorary members for life for saving the player's life. He had been standing up at the time of the crash and the floor beneath him had opened up for him to fall through.

It was a moment when years of training and experience and an acceptance that with education comes responsibility came to the fore. I hope you will accept your future responsibilities in the same way and not stand back and be passive when your skills can help another person.

In conclusion, in this complex, contradictory world in which you are now gaining independence, don't let that independence mean a greater distance between you and your parents. With your growing maturity it is an opportunity for you to appreciate more than ever all that your parents have taught you through their example as well as their mistakes. Their experiences can help you unravel the complexities of this world and to understand them. Listen to your parents and grandparents and learn from them. You no longer need your school, but believe me, you are still going to need your parents.

