

2018 Scholars Leavers Dinner.

UNIVERSITY SCHOLARSHIP – FHW

As if you needed any reminding of the fact, all of you are now well and truly in the throes of revision. Some of you may be dealing with high levels of stress and anxiety. Others may be quietly confident. But regardless of how you're currently feeling, once you've finished your exams and left the school, there will be an interesting period for reflection. I've been asked to talk to you promising scholars today about my experiences of university scholarship. Prior to arriving at Charterhouse, I spent 9 years working in the university 'space' as cultural theorists often like to describe it, teaching and researching at Oxford and studying at Cambridge and Trinity College Dublin. This talk – or rather series of brief reflections – will draw on some of my experiences at these universities in ways that I hope you will find useful as you start to think about the next step.

What is the purpose of university scholarship? Well for nearly all subjects, it is about managing the hard transition from being a *consumer* of knowledge to a *creator* of knowledge. Now when I first arrived at university, three months older than you, I didn't see how this would be tricky. I assumed that I was an original thinker with interesting things to say. Third tutorial in, my supervisor sensed my misplaced confidence and found a photocopied essay from a previous student he had taught at another college on the same topic. To my shock and to my supervisor's barely-suppressed boredom, student X's essay made the same argument as me with considerably more ease and grace of expression. Beside it, my writing sounded stale, predictable and turgid. If academics seem tired and jaded by what you say it's because they really have heard it all before. Making an original argument at university level is difficult. It can take years and years to say or do anything new. And especially if you're working in the sciences, your research can become obsolete in seconds. But the only way in which you are going to get there is through three of the values that you will have started to learn here: responsibility, resilience and open-mindedness.

A willingness to expose yourself to tough criticism and to test your findings is the most essential skill of all. A safe space is a thoughtless space. And no place at all for a scholar. Being defensive makes personal growth impossible. Those who respond negatively to criticism will lose the respect of academics very quickly, who will cease to treat you as somebody capable of being stretched and challenged (a much greater insult). You need to be accommodating, future-oriented and resourceful. All of you, I hope, will have absorbed the current pedagogical interest in 'growth mindsets' – an educational theory about learning curves developed by Professor Carol Dweck, the Stanford University psychologist. At school, a growth mindset is vital to success. At university, it is preconditional. When you've spent months working on a topic only to have it taken apart in a short meeting, the angry, reactive and fight-or-flight response is more than understandable. You will need to have the strength of character, however, to spend the following months not protecting who you are and what you've written but earnestly addressing points of weakness, identifying points for future development, and rebuilding. Be aware that you can also become the victim of a great essay or exam result that has the authorities cheering. You will stagnate if you don't find new challenges, ideas and questions that can bring you out of your comfort zone.

Be confident not in who you are but in who you can become. A healthy combination of honesty, modesty and humour will allow you to turn many of your false illusions about the world and your place in it into a giant *vanitas* painting. Your intellectual evolution is a way for you to enter different

and deeper realities. It cannot be packaged into an end-product. You should learn to enjoy the process of thinking. Pablo Picasso once said that 'Computers are useless. They can only give you answers.' He wasn't a Luddite. He wasn't against technology. And his statement is certainly not true with respect to the current state of machine intelligence. What he meant was that an answer means an end, a full stop, and to Picasso there was never an end, only the journey. The purpose of study for Picasso and for universities alike is not just to add to ever-widening pools of information but to assess problems fully and to pursue lines of inquiry. Above all, you should be concerned with *depth* – with the intimate process of discovering and nurturing ideas, and being changed by them.

It should be mentioned that academics can be strange people, in my experience at least. Some are exceptionally compassionate. But brace yourselves for the mega and monomaniacal figure to whom all warm pastoral considerations – such as eating and sleeping – are but fuzzy background noise. Managing the time pressures of extended research is another challenge you will face at university. You will hear lots of stories about heroic marathons, caffeine and sleepless nights. Don't be fooled. There's no point romanticising disorganisation. A regular working routine is the only way to navigate through large amounts of material. When you start to see the same patterns recurring and connecting in that material, which will take methodical and consistent study, you will be close to arriving at profound insights and a central research question. A complex and chaotic web of information will start to form distinct shapes.

People often ask what motivates academics to research a single topic. For me it was the growth of nationalist ideologies and their cultural consequences, which in our own time have started to become as marked as they were in the 1930s. My doctorate focused on Irish literature and art after the revolution of 1916-23. The society that evolved from that struggle was not a good one. It was full of government figures determined to Make Ireland Great Again. In practice, this meant civil war, censorship, Vatican control and trade wars with England. But it coincided with some of the most fascinating work ever produced by Irish writers and artists. Some of you might remember what Harry Lime has to say in *The Third Man* about Switzerland, peace and the cuckoo clock. Neutrality and moderation rarely drive cultural change and innovation.

When you get to that interesting period of reflection I mentioned at the start of this speech. When exams are done. When term has ended. When you are freer than you have ever been before. Take the values you've learned here – responsibility, resilience and open-mindedness – and spend time thinking about the topic that energises you most. Passion is the final ingredient. You have all made a great start here. Best of luck in your exams, and above all, enjoy your final term.