

# FIVE SKILLS FOR LIFE

*Marlborough College Commemoration Day*

*23rd May 2015*

## THE REVD CHARLOTTE BANNISTER-PARKER

What a glorious morning and thank you so much for inviting me to this special service. Normally, in the USA, on these occasions one might expect to hear from a talented actor like Jim Carrey or famous writers such as JK Rowling so I feel utterly honoured and privileged to stand here and be with you just as an Old Malborian. I hope to show you how talented and extraordinary you already are as a group of powerful young people on the edge of a new life going out into a new world.

But firstly before I discuss your unique education and give you your 5 skills for life, I need to give out 3 congratulations.

The first is congratulations and acknowledgement to all you parents. For your tireless dedication, for the years of hauling school trunks up flights of stairs, for the hundreds of drop-offs and pick-ups, for the multiple trips to Crosby and Laurence, for the upsizing of uniform and the sewing in of name tags, and for those nervous times when you wished you could be beside your child and you weren't able to be there. Finally for navigating the Almanac, which five years ago you probably did not need glasses to read and now you probably do!

The second congratulation is to all you teachers, houses masters and house mistresses, and all the faculty. Each and every one of you has played a part in cajoling, inspiring, nurturing and supporting this year group in the classroom, on the playing field, in houses and even on mountain tops. Through successes and through failures, you have been beside them and helped them emerge as the truly great Marlborians they are.

And finally, a congratulations to all of you extraordinary young people. Whether you have been here for 5 years or for the sixth form only, you are in the graduating class (to use an American term) of 2015. You have survived the crowded Norwood Hall; no doubt you have spent much time on the field; hopefully dodged detentions and probably received a few chits. You will have celebrated many triumphs here and suffered probably some lows, and of course will have definitely made great lifelong friends.

But perhaps most importantly, I would like to argue, you have uncovered talents you did not know you had. For me the great distinguishing factor about a Marlborian is that you can't be put in a box. Unlike other major British public schools, alumni from Marlborough College have such a great range of gifts, talents and attitudes that are different and indefinable. Alongside your academic work you have development so many strengths & talents: you have

shown bravery, courage, creativity, adaptability, openness, cheerfulness, kindness and respectfulness.

And it is these strengths and talents that will act as a springboard for life. In the year group of 1981 (can you imagine that!) my contemporaries took those talents and went out into the world to be such a range of different things; writers, artists, biosphere managers, even priests, along with the more conventional occupations.

So why do I mention this? What is important about your talent set?

Never forget how rich and extraordinary the Marlborian education is. What you have been given and what you have received here at Marlborough with its outstanding facilities, fascinating trips and great teachers, is almost an unsurpassable broad education in the world. The great poet Yeats said:

*Education is not the filling of a pail but the lighting of a fire.  
As on the eve of going out into the world,  
Your fire has been lit by being here.*

But please pause for a moment and consider that for so many children and young people around the world your experience of education is but a distant dream. Even now in this day and age, for millions of young people around the world just the filling of the pail would be a privilege – and for many that is all they can barely hope for.

My work in Africa has exposed me to shocking realities:

In the township of Kimberley, South Africa, where I lived with my family, schools often have a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:50. Only last week I heard from a group of sixth-formers from Qwaqwa that of the 7 subjects that they need to matriculate they only have a teacher for 2 of them.

In Kinshasa, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Grace, again a sixth former, was forced to drink petrol and set alight by her stepmother as she was accused of being a witch. Grace had to run away from both her home and her school, cutting short her hope of continuing her education.

And you are lucky to have here the most beautiful buildings in which to learn. In 1980 I co-founded the charity *Learning for Life* to educate girls in Asia. In Nepal we lost 12 out of 20 schools in an Earthquake. That would be like waking up one morning and walking down from Littlefield House to find no Court or chapel!

But like the educational activist Malala, I have always been convinced of the power of education and I quote her from her speech at a UN conference:

*“Let us pick up our books and our pens. They are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world.”*

So why on this glorious morning do I mention this other educational reality? I don't want you to feel guilty or just realise your heightened responsibility to mankind because of your privilege. That would insult your intelligence - you already know that. But I want you to be aware that, regardless of your A level results, this school has given you talents and strengths, an inner light, a greatness you are probably not even aware of. You are like the honoured men in our reading from the Book of Ecclesiasticus; you are the "Pride of our Time".

Let me explain why I can say that with such confidence. Here I have my Almanac of the summer term card 1980. Like yours, though smaller and with no pictures, it has its timetable on the back cover on which I had underlined the "Darling Cup Debating Competition at Wellington" on Thursday 13th March (I don't know whether we won - I hope we would do now!). I also underlined the "Art School Literary & Art Societies" with a lecture from Dr B. Richards of Brasenose College Oxford. Already I was being given the opportunities to build up my broader skills and interests outside the class room. You too have been given those extra chances: exposed to debates, the theatre, the arts, the sporting fixtures, extra lectures and great opportunities to expand your horizons.

And if I could get in a time machine and go back to my graduation from Marlborough I would have loved to hear this, that I had received here at Marlborough untold educational riches which should make me so strong as to hold these five things true for life ahead. Not only can you afford to do the following, you have been trained to do the following. You have these skills to:

1. Take risks - which you can do because you have such talent.
2. Not be afraid of life - because you are more talented, stronger and powerful than you realise.
3. Find your passion & follow your heart - Teachers and parents don't always know what's best for you. Mine stopped me reading theology because they thought it would not lead to anything!
4. Be adaptable - you will have a number of careers so retraining and retooling yourselves will be an important skill.
5. Finally, without doubt, the most important thing to realise is that in life the only mark that really matters amongst all your grades is an A \* for kindness.

"Unexpected kindness is the most powerful, least costly, and most underrated agent of human change." Senator Bob Kerrey

So if you combine your education, the extraordinary talents you already possess, with kindness, think of that as your ticket to not only engage in the wider world but change it too.

I leave you with a quote from the wonderful American writer Mark Twain:

*“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you did not do than by the things you did do. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbour, catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore, dream and discover”.*

Amen.