

. . . In the field of intellect, Many a prize we've won,
And upon the field of sport, Thomians yield to none.
Be it work, or be it play, We will do and dare. . .

I am sure that I need not remind you that it is our calling as Thomians to continue to do and dare in everything we do. This morning, it is indeed a great pleasure and a profound privilege for me to be here, within these hallowed halls where I learnt, literally, to walk, to run and even laid the foundation and gained the wherewithal, to fly!

Headmaster, Revd. Christopher Balraj, Members of the Board of Governors, Tutorial Staff Parents, Old Boys and my dear young Thomians, let me first of all express my sincere and heartfelt thanks to all of you for granting me this honour, for inviting me to this event and for giving me an opportunity to be a part of this very important event in your annual calendar. I consider it especially opportune that I get to speak to the torchbearers of the future, to be able to share with them some thoughts that I believe will help them to navigate the increasingly complicated path leading to their future and to the future of our great motherland.

As I look back on my past, travel back in time, my mind goes back to the days of St. Thomas' Prep School, Bandarawela the precursor to this institution, where I spent ten of my formative years. Indeed to me it was more a second family than a school. Of course, the School flag and anthem were different, but it was within these same hallowed halls that I learnt lessons that are still apt, and made friendships that still stand. The fact that of the twenty of us in our class seven went on to serve in the military, also tells me that it is here that were instilled the values of service to one's country that still drives all I do today!

Of all the memories of my childhood, and of the time I spent in these halls, there is one that I cherish, of an individual whom I look upon as St. Thomas Prep School, Bandarawela itself. A thin, tall man who was strict but possessed the kindest heart that a human could possibly have, a laugh that echoed around the hills, and a love for the school that went beyond imagination. A man who knew by first name each of the 500 students who were at the school at the time and even where they came from. A man who would join the boys at sports, particularly badminton. Mr. SLA Ratnayaka, the head-master for the full ten years that I was here, taught me the lessons that still guide my life, that still count, and that I will never forget. God Bless You Sir!

I am proud to hear that Our GCE O/L results have been encouraging with a number of pupils achieving straight A's. That the GCE A/L results too have produced brilliant students who have entered Sri Lankan and overseas universities. In addition, that we have produced numerous President Scouts in the recent past; all of these feats are not surprising but yet are admirable feats that we can be justifiably proud of.

To my young fellow Thomians, let me address a question.

Did the achievement of your predecessors, that have brought glory to this institutions that we all love and cherish, come because they were brilliant individuals who with effortless ease, overcame the challenges that these milestones posed and achieved excellence over all others? Can they be repeated only by those among you who are brilliant and outstanding?

I want to tell you, my young friends, that while there may have been, as is certain to be in any group of students, a few brilliant and outstanding individuals in that group, that the majority of those high achievers were average students like each and every one of you, who with hard work and determination achieved excellence, not because it was easy, but because they wanted it, because they wanted to achieve excellence and to be the best that they could be.

Gentlemen, today we live in a very material world, where everything is a commodity, that has value only if it has a demand, if it addresses a want or need.

Excellence, my friends is one such commodity that will never lose its value and its appeal. And it is a commodity that you can all acquire, and that once you do, will bring you great rewards and dividends.

Martin Luther King Jr. once said:

“If a man is called to be a street sweeper, he should sweep streets even as Michelangelo painted, or Beethoven composed music or Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will pause to say, 'Here lived a great street sweeper who did his job well.'”

Each and every one of you has a calling, something which you are called on to do. Something that we can excel at, which, when we find out, will let us know what our purpose in life is! Something, that when you discover, you will find that you will excel at because you will know that it is what you are meant to do!

Some of you may have already found what it is. Many of you may not yet have discovered that calling. Some will find it soon, some later, and sadly, some, never. Those who don't will be spending their lives doing things that will not lead them to the actualisation of their true potential.

So what do we do?

If you have found what you are good at, what makes you feel in your element, pursue it and be the best that you can be at it. Direct your energies to that so that you can excel at that particular calling. However, always keep in mind, that even though you have found something that you are reasonably good at, there might be something else that you would be excellent at! So never close yourself to opportunities!

If you have yet not found what you are good at, don't despair,

Remember that you will not learn whether you are good at something or not until you have tried it. Make use of the opportunities that life presents you with. Go into everything that you get an opportunity to do and find out if it is what you are meant to do with your life!

Your parents, your teachers and your elders will help you find the right opportunities and steer you clear of those hazards that come in the shape of opportunities. Mind you, there are many such, and it is important that you realise that as well: That all opportunities that you may encounter are not going to be positive and wholesome ones that will yield positive outcomes. Remember that your elders, be they your families or your teachers, who have the benefit and wisdom of experience will help you to navigate your way through this maze that is the world of today, if you will permit them to.

What are these opportunities that I am talking about?

In this institution, you are certain to obtain an academic education above par. The management and the staff will put in their maximum effort to ensure that you get the academic exposure that you need to master the conceptual matter that you need. Make use of them, pick their brains and get them to help you to master these. Indeed they will benefit you in your future.

Let me digress a moment here to tell you a profound secret that I discovered. Like you, when I was in your seat, I too thought that some of what I was taught at school had no real importance to the real world outside. And looking back, I have to be honest, I can't recall a single time that I had to use Calculus to figure out how to fly a plane out of an enemy area, under attack. Yet, the fact that my mind had expanded through calculus, and many other complex analytical concepts, made it possible for me to analyse the situation I was in and to objectively find solutions to the problems that faced me, be they small or large. It helped me to figure out how to get out of countless hazards, that I may not have been able to survive had I not had that exposure.

What you are learning, my young friends, is how to think and to use your mental faculties. If you don't do your calculus and your integrals, your literature and your Commerce, your brain will not learn the paths that it needs to follow for you to solve life's problems!

I am a firm believer in the importance of sports, in the development of the overall person. Sports teach you important lessons about decision making on your feet, about interaction with people and about leadership and inspiring others. The confidence that you gain in the sports field, the human values you learn on the playing field, are invaluable and cannot be supplanted by any amount of classroom sessions. Sports also make you appreciate the importance of exercise and an active lifestyle, keeping your physical self in shape so that you are not burdened with disability and disease as you get older.

Make use of the opportunities that come your way to practice leadership. Leadership is not learned from books. It can only be learnt by practice. I don't believe that leaders are born, I believe that they are made, that leadership is a character trait that we can inculcate and develop. I believe that institutions like this are the places where leaders are made, and that each and every one of you has the potential of being a great leader if only you want and will it. Don't wait for someone to invite you to lead. If you feel that you can, seize the moment, and lead! If you fail, try again for indeed, this is how you learn.

Make use of these opportunities and any others that came your way and you will definitely discover your calling. Don't be disappointed that when you do, you find that your calling is not to be the next Bill Gates or Albert Einstein. Remember, excellence is not about being something that nobody else can be. It is about being the best at what you do.

Finally, let me quote another saying of Martin Luther King:

“If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way”

In closing, let me once again thank the Headmaster, Revd. Christopher Balraj, Members of the Board of Governors, Tutorial Staff and my dear young Thomians, for granting me this honour, for inviting me to this event and for lending me your ears.

Esto Perpetua.

Speech by Air Marshal Kolitha Gunatilleke at the STC Bandarawela Prize Giving 2014 on July 19th, 2015.