**Upon your retirement**

**Michael Rathborne**

*Editor’s note: Michael sent the email below to a highly respected colleague following his attendance at their farewell school assembly the day before their retirement. Parts of it could be adapted quite easily as part of a speech or student address.*

Hi [name]

I’m certain that today [your last day at work] will be an interesting one for you all-round, and I suspect that you will be receiving many phone calls, visits and emails from well-wishers. I just wanted to tick off a couple of things as I started my day today, which I have been reflecting on since yesterday.

I firstly wanted to say how privileged I was to be invited to attend the assembly yesterday and how honoured I felt to be able to be part of that significant event in your career. I have already emailed [name] with my sentiments but I will just echo to you what I said to her – that the assembly was a credit to all involved – students, staff and community.

On a personal professional level I also wanted to reiterate my appreciation of your wit, wisdom and ongoing support since my arrival three years ago. It is often said that one does not know what they will miss until it is no longer there. The monolith that education is will roll on but it won’t quite be the same – as it is and I’m sure as it has always been. I have had some significant influences on my career to this point in time and I am proud to acknowledge that you are one of those.

I am by a nature a reflective personality and like anybody I have heroes. My particular hero is Robert Kennedy, the younger brother of JFK, and in thinking about you as an educational leader and as an individual, both yesterday during the assembly and afterwards, I was moved to go back to the words and wisdom of Bobby.

On 6 June 1966, 23 days before I was born, Bobby Kennedy gave a ‘Day of Affirmation’ speech at the University of Cape Town in South Africa. It is one of my favourite speeches of all time (and it always makes me lament the actual lack of real leaders in contemporary politics). In it Bobby speaks of many things and displays his broad knowledge by quoting from throughout history many words pertinent and relevant to the modern day setting he found himself in – apartheid South Africa.

He quotes Machiavelli who said that “There is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.” And I’m sure you well appreciate those sentiments.

Bobby continued that the path of change is strewn with dangers.

The first was futility, “the belief there is nothing one man or woman can do against the enormous array of the world’s ills – against misery and ignorance, injustice and violence. Yet many of the world’s greatest movements, of thought and action, have flowed from the work of a single man … Few will have the greatness to bend history itself, but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation… It is from numberless diverse acts of courage and belief that human history is shaped. Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.

The second danger is that of expediency; of those who say that hopes and beliefs must bend before immediate necessities … the belief that idealism, high aspirations, and deep convictions are not incompatible with the most practical and efficient of programs – that there is no basic inconsistency between ideals and realistic possibilities… but we also know that only those who dare to fail greatly, can ever achieve greatly.

A third danger is timidity. Few men are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of society. Moral courage is a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. Yet it is the one essential, vital quality of those who seek to change a world which yields most painfully to change… in the life of the honourable and the good it is they who act rightly who win the prize…

For the fortunate among us, the fourth danger is comfort, the temptation to follow the easy and familiar paths of personal ambition and financial success so grandly spread before those who have the privilege of education.”

There is more but the point I make is that from my own experience and from what I have witnessed in visiting your school yesterday and on the other occasions that I have been there it is clear that you have never shied away from the difficulties inherent in ‘taking the lead in the introduction of a new order of things.’ You have not succumbed to futility, expediency nor timidity; and finally you have revelled in seeking out discomfort rather than comfort. It is the last that has given me greatest guidance, and inspiration.

I fervently hope when you raise a glass this evening and perhaps quietly reflect that you know in your heart of hearts that you left no stone unturned and gave all that you had. It is time for the dwarves that come after to stand on the shoulders of giants. ☺

Enjoy whatever comes next.

**Contributor details**

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