

Reflections on a year at St. Mary's – First Speech Day Address

The educationalist Michael Fullan asserts that learning is not doing but reflecting on doing. With this in mind it seems only right to look back briefly over the last year to consider what I have learned about St Mary's.

There is no getting away from the fact that the year will always be remembered as the Year of the new Head and the Year of Inspection. Girls have had to come to terms with a Headmistress who does not stand on the stage for assemblies and who has very strong views on earrings, whilst staff have found every aspect of their job explored, dissected and interfered in by a total stranger in her attempts to come to know the school. I am grateful to all for their tolerance, forbearance and support.

10 am on the first day back of the Lent term brought the telephone call that all Heads dread. By lunchtime the lead inspector had laid out the timetable for the following week and provided me with a list of all the documentation that he expected to receive by four o'clock that afternoon. For a total of five days over two visits, separated by four weeks, regulatory requirements were checked, lessons observed, work scrutinised, staff and students interviewed and thanks to a rather unfortunate incident involving burnt toast in the Sixth Form common room a fire evacuation observed; described by the lead inspector moreover as 'impeccable'. The inspectors' report served to confirm what we all already knew. St. Mary's is a very good school.

As Megan says, I have learned much this year about St Mary's traditions. The Kindness Cup in Junior House, the Tidiness picture in Senior House and all those events that Megan has described. Ellen Goodman describes traditions as the guideposts driven deep into our subconscious. They provide a community with a sense of identity, a sense of continuity, a sense of stability in the shifting sands of a constantly changing world. They are an important part of what we give to our girls here at St. Marys and I find it a source of immense sadness that so many other institutions can find neither the time nor the commitment for them in the data driven, target obsessed, society that seems to be developing around us all.

I have learned much also about the St Mary's spirit, another indefinable, immeasurable yet invaluable ingredient that sets any school apart from any other. I learned that it is one which inspires the girls to cheer each other on, step in where needed, encourage the fearful and congratulate each other on their successes. It engenders a strong competitive spirit within the School in House Competitions organised in Science, in Cookery, in Maths and in Sport and of course the Sports Days, especially Junior House Sports Day when the weather was in no way allowed to get the better of us and when we gave thanks for the vision of the governors in providing us with this Sports Hall! And this spirit is taken out into the community not only through the array of sports fixtures in which they participate, but in public speaking, technology, thinking skills events, Quest, and just recently the Race for Life at Cassiobury Park. And as I watched them on the stage at the end of the Gym and Dance Show in May applauding each other – and very importantly acknowledging so wholeheartedly the hard work of their teachers – I witnessed the richness of this school which sees girls through from 3-18, with older girls nurturing and leading the younger girls, and



Talking to Senior House girls



the younger girls aspiring to the greatness of their older role models.

I have learned much about St Mary's girls – one or two of them maybe rather more than they would have wished me to. I have watched them perform in drama productions – Stage Directions, A Midsummer's Night Dream, GCSE and A level productions and I know that Mrs Culmer is planning something very special for next term! Watch this space. I have had the privilege of listening to our musicians, our singers, our various choirs and orchestras; of watching our Junior House girls making a Splash and sailing the seas with Molly and her Pirates. You are all very talented, girls! I have seen their hard work in raising money for charities, whether individually, in Year groups or as part of their Houses and coming forward to express real concern for some of the tragedies which have sadly occurred in our world this year. You are very caring, girls. I have marvelled at the talent of our artists at the GCSE and A level Art exhibition, as well as the quality of work in displays so evident in every corner of the school. You are very creative, girls! And you seem to make an awful lot of cakes! And yet through all this they do not lose sight of the importance of their academic studies. Last year at GCSE 80 % of our girls achieved A*, A or B grades with 100% A* - C, whilst at A level 79 % of our girls achieved the top grades, including the elusive, newly introduced A* grades. They promise to be just as impressive this year. You are very successful, girls. Girls in Years 10, 11, 12 and 13 are now all involved in public examinations almost throughout the year; *The SMA Bollywood evening*



and it is testament to the staff at this school that we do still manage to find time to teach them and to inspire them with a love of learning. The examinations are now happily finished for this academic year. All girls wishing to proceed on to University courses in September have secured their places in subjects ranging from Medicine to English, Business Studies to Fashion. We wish them well and I hope that all our girls will manage to put results out of their minds for a little while, relax and have a much deserved rest.

In my first few weeks at this school, I was able to meet many of you either at the various formal events organised or when you came in to see me. A question kept popping up. Is it what you expected it to be? A strange little question which continues to intrigue me. Have I missed something? A ghost stalking the corridors of Senior House maybe or a mad woman in the attic? But yes, there are some things which have surprised me.



I could never hoped for nor expected the level of support and friendship that has been extended to me by a man of whom I was actually more than a little frightened and greatly in awe. Thank you, Derek, for all that you have done for the School not only this year but through all the years and for all that you have done for me. I feel truly blessed to have you as my Chair of Governors. I could never have hoped for nor expected the level of talent and commitment so prevalent in the staff here. They give so freely of their time for the girls. Walk round the school any lunch or break time and you will see them working with individual pupils, guiding them advising them, setting them on the right path whether academically or pastorally. They are highly qualified professionals, experts in their fields. Thank you to all staff, teaching and non teaching, for all that you have done in what I know has been a challenging year for you. I am very grateful. I could never hoped for nor expected the level of involvement of the parents. All those events that support landmarks in the school year; Frost Fair – with a Santa's grotto to rival that of Harrod's – Easter, Mother's Day, Father's Day, the Fun Day following the Junior House

Sports Day, your support at Open Mornings and so many valuable social networking opportunities provided by the SMA. However, I hope nobody minds me saying that the highlight of my year was the Bollywood evening. This epitomised the community spirit here with parents working so hard behind the scenes, our Sixth Form girls working to keep us all supplied with food –and Year 11 girls enthraling us with their demonstration of Indian dancing ; the buzz of that evening the camaraderie, is something I will never forget. Nor will I forget the exceptional generosity of those parents who donated so significantly in terms of basket prizes, lighting, furniture and even one parent who

donated all the delicious food. On behalf of the girls, who are the ones who benefit from all your work and all your donations, I thank you most sincerely.

Another question which kept popping up in those first few weeks was 'So, what is your vision, Mrs Ross?'

I have worked since my arrival at St Mary's with staff, students, governors and parents to identify a three year school improvement plan which was ratified by governors on 21st May. It is of its very nature a shared vision a shared commitment.

At the heart of everything we do must be the assurance of high quality teaching and learning for the girls. Nothing else matters. We should introduce nothing new which cannot be suffixed with the words 'in order to improve the educational experience of the girls'. A few years ago the Archbishop of York said "True education does more than enable us to pass examinations. True education forms the common mind – it creates the realm for the application of knowledge beyond simple understanding. The great aim of education should be informed action and not merely minds filled with facts".



As a judge at the Year 7 Enterprise Day

I am certainly not suggesting a retreat from the traditional curriculum. We must not close our eyes to the importance of the academic; rightly or wrongly it is the measure by which we are judged by others in an educational and professional capacity. We teach deep and important things through the subjects we offer and so through the 'hidden curriculum', the ethical structure the moral agenda, talked about much less these days but nonetheless of immense importance. Michael Gove's reform of the National Curriculum in my mind loses sight of this – and thank goodness as an independent school we will not be tied to its strictures and we will continue to place an emphasis on all aspects of what constitutes a 'true education'. We will look carefully at our curriculum provision, from nursery right through to Sixth Form, ensuring that it fits our girls, that it responds to their needs, that it supports, stretches and challenges them and prepares them for the challenges of a 21st century workplace where the role of women is still being defined. The extension of the Thinking Skills programme from Junior House into Key Stage 3 will challenge our girls to question, question, always question. I want all our girls to question the world around them, the social and moral attitudes we have laid down and if they find those values wanting they must have the courage to challenge them. We will ensure that our girls leave us with the independent learning skills so crucial to equip them for the lifelong learning which we all have to embrace in this rapidly changing world, presentational skills, research skills, ICT skills. We are already working on an ICT strategy for the next three years which will ensure that our facilities are second to none and which will incorporate the development of a learning platform, enabling the girls to access St Mary's learning resources from anywhere in the world. There will be no hiding place, girls! We must ensure that they fully understand how best they learn, the strategies that they need to use to overcome obstacles to learning, and which they will then use for the rest of their lives, independent study skills, and above all a love of and a thirst for knowledge. My dream is to facilitate this with a new ILRC – to improveA group of staff will soon start work to ensure that we have an AfL culture firmly embedded in the school which will give them the confidence they need to go out and be proud, measuring their achievements in terms of their own strengths and challenges, considering themselves neither superior to others nor working in others' shadows. Each girl should and must aspire to her own personal level of excellence, but first she must know what that excellence is; and so must we as teachers. Let them not fall prey, to borrow a phrase, to "the soft bigotry of low aspirations". One of the most important lessons



we can teach our girls is how to fail, because if they are not failing they are not taking risks and without taking risks they merely coast in their comfort zone. Michelangelo, who certainly knew something about taking risks, said "The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it." Or even Madonna "It hasn't been easy, but then I don't like easy". Let no girl at St. Mary's rest on her laurels!

Success is where talent meets opportunity; we will increase the girls' opportunities for achievement, particularly through the House system where the girls will find themselves participating in even more inter House competitions, and through an extension of the provision already in place. A working party, comprising students and staff, will be set up to see what else we can offer. We will continue to canvas the opinions of students on the running of their school through the School Council, ensuring that their voice is heard, that they work within a system that they acknowledge to be fair, a safe environment where their well being is paramount.



The Head Girl Flag ceremony 2011

Underpinning all of this must be a strong system of supportive pastoral care. St Mary's always has and always will be known for its pastoral system, its nurturing and individual care, its emphasis on values. It is there to catch them if they fall but which also encourages them, motivates them and reinforces the spirit of community at St. Mary's. And this academic and pastoral support must equally extend to its staff; a school's most valuable resource who must equally receive the respect and support of all of us, and what a staff we have here at St. Mary's.

I am proud of the fact that St Mary's is an inclusive school, a school where everybody is somebody; it is a microcosm of the world that the girls will be called upon to function in frighteningly quickly and the world is not an academic hothouse. But it is a school where every girl is expected to achieve her best. And I am proud of the fact that it is a girls' school. The jury is still out on the final judgement as to whether or not children perform better in single sex or co-educational schools. What is certain is that boys and girls learn in very different ways and in a girls only school we have the privilege of being able to target our research, our methodology, our resources and our opportunities totally in the direction of what is best for our girls. We are a single sex school but what is important in that identity is the fact that we are experts in the education of girls.

Those of you who met me right at the beginning of the year will be aware of my mantra:

To educate is to form character, shape values, liberate the imagination; it is to pass human wisdom, knowledge and ingenuity from one generation to the next; it is a duty and a calling.

I make no apology for repeating the story that some of you will have already heard. On one of my visits to St. Mary's before taking up my post, I was wandering around Junior House when a girl stopped me and said "Mrs Ross, I think you have chosen just the right school to come to". I wonder if that girl remembers saying that to me? Well, Amelie, I think you were absolutely right. I am so pleased that I came to St. Mary's. I think it isamazing!

Jean Ross

Headmistress