

Friday 8 October 2021

Dear Everyone,

Headline: *Smart Watches with internet connectivity.* This will be a disappointment for the few children who now own smart watches. There is no reasonable way for us to check if they are or are not connected to the internet or operate as 'phones. We're constantly having to stay abreast of advances in technology to ensure children are clear of unnecessary distractions at school. Smart watches fall within the same category as mobile/smart phones and will need to be handed in on arrival.

The actuarial software used by my pension advisor makes calculations based on an average need to finance my dotage to age 85. Put another way, according to the machine, I have just under 30 years left on earth. That sharpened my thinking! I might be lucky, and be like Diana Gayford, one of the first producers of *Woman's Hour*, now into her first century and is on air again this week celebrating 75 years of that seminal programme.

This generation of children is predicted to live to a hundred years of age, are likely to have portfolio careers as they hurtle towards the sunny uplands, and almost certainly will go through many metamorphoses in life. Who they are now is not completely who they will become, and a lot of that will not be in our control, either. That's really exciting from some, and very hard to come to terms with for others, depending on one's disposition.

Why do we spend so much time concerned with the future? Prep, as in Prep school, is a shortening of Preparatory. Yet it's not an entirely helpful label if we're *also* interested in enjoying life in its moment. To savour childhood, to be joyful in discovery, to mess up, fall out with people, make friends again, cry, laugh, be in wonder at something new to them. To find themselves and their own interests. To become, becoming.

At parent open days I make a now well-worn joke: "The first thing you'll want to know is, how to get in to SPCS, the second thing you'll want to know is, how to get out". The 'joke', which isn't at all of the funny kind, truncates the formative years of a child's life, but it addresses one of the big questions of parents in the room.

The anxiety of the next school pervades. Indeed, marketing advisors, school membership associations, governors, and others constantly prompt school leaders to make a big fuss of the outcomes of their schools. This is mostly signaled by clearly flagging how many 'good' destination schools our pupils go on to, and how many scholarships are awarded. (You can see ours here, and I know it needs updating:

<https://www.spcslondon.com/about/destinations-of-leavers>).

The destination is, the wisdom goes, core to what parents are buying: safe transition to the next place, as if education can be or ever is a purely transactional relationship (it isn't). If that really is the main reason, then we have all gone horribly wrong across the whole of education somewhere along the line.

Those of you who have now been to senior school open days will, I can guarantee, have heard something more or less like this from the Heads of senior schools: “We offer a holistic education, and care for our pupils in all their difference and majesty. We attained 95% A-A*, and 6 of our pupils have gone on to Oxbridge.” Notice the emphasis on **we**. Make of that what you will, but the conjoining of those two statements is not always compatible or helpful for all children. Maintained schools talk about Value Add, a notoriously vague and insecure measure. We are all in the race for credentials, and it starts young.

This anxiety for ‘what’s next’ drives tutoring among other things. And our anxiety as adults can drive children to distraction from what it is to be a child, and too quickly can erode what school (and childhood) is also for, in that old maxim that education is for a life, not just for a living.

What to do?

Language is often at the root of things. We mustn’t ignore how children feel about the world, or about their experiences in school, for good and ill, and how we reflect it back to them in the language we use is important: what is it to be proportionate?

Our role as adults is to help children to become attuned to their emotions: not be too frightened, too angry, too generous, too patient and to be appropriate to the circumstances. As adults we too sometimes struggle to find what Aristotle called the ‘mean’, as in the ‘right amount’ in our emotional responses, and we get it wrong all the time. It is rarely about fault or blame.

I once heard a useful parable about empathy. When someone is in the ditch, keep one foot on the bank so you can help them out. Jump in with both feet and there are now two people in the ditch.

I’ve been made aware of a web site that purports to support parents and help children build resilience. Designed by Dr Kathy Weston, it comes from a good place. Kathy was booked to run a workshop for parents at SPCS pre-lockdown, but sadly that couldn’t happen. Since then, Kathy has used lockdown to good effect and created *Tooled Up*. It comes with good recommendations from colleagues in other Prep schools, and I have asked some of our staff to review it to see if we should become a *Tooled-Up* school.

I would very much like to hear from you if you think this is something you would like us to subscribe to. Have a dig around in here.

<https://www.tooledupeducation.com/>

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Two firsts this week.

Wednesday evening was the first time I have been in a dance studio with the specific aim of rehearsing for a live performance in nearly 30 years. I am co-founder of the London Heads' Dance Society, and 20 Heads of schools came together this week to start to prepare for a Strictly Heads performance in June 2022. More news about how to get involved in due course. Our aim is to raise money for the charity icandance. You can learn about them here: <https://youtu.be/pafYLbWI8-U>

The other first this term is that we are back in the Cathedral again. The last time we were in our spiritual home was over 18 months ago. In a moment of joy and wonder, we came to find peace in the madness of the world in that glorious building on Tuesday morning. Singing together, *Lord of All Hopefulness*, croaked back into life. Our Chaplain admitted to being moved to tears. So was I.

Here is Tom Waits, whose wonderfully croaky voice brings a poignancy to Bernstein's song *Somewhere*, a song we performed for speech day last summer.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=La0cYq-BWVk>

*There's a place for us, a time and a place for us
Hold my hand and we're half way there
Hold my hand and I'll take you there*

Somehow, someday, somewhere

Have a good weekend

Simon