

Friday 21 January 2022

Dear Everyone

Headlines:

A reminder that if your child has a coat that they wear to school, that there is a regulation school coat required as part of the uniform.

We now have a second container for wearable phones/internet devices – certain kinds of smart watches have phone and internet connections, and these fall under the same rules as all other mobile phones and should be handed in on arrival.

Assemblies are some of the best bits of the week for me. The current model of having one or two year groups in the hall, and simultaneously broadcasting to the rest of the school, has a different dynamic to when we're all together. With a smaller group in the same physical space, conversation is easier, we can joke with each other, have fun and play off ideas, and has a similar feel perhaps to something like *Saturday Kitchen Live*, or radio chat shows. You have a conversation with one group, but you're alert to the audience you can't see. Why would anyone want to dial into someone else's conversation? And yet we do, and it can be compelling partly because it's about watching and listening to stories unfold with people we connect with in some way.

Two children who visited a kimono shop in the holiday, one of whom in Year 2 made a splendid book about it, provided the stimulus for a collection of connected ideas for one recent assembly. The story of silk, the origin and importance of the silk road and the symbolism of designs and colours on traditional dress, plus how to kill a silkworm without breaking the thread, all made for a lively discussion with Year 4. In that assembly the brother of the author of the book was in the room, and he also features in this marvellous memoir.

In another assembly, the little book I bought for £3 on holiday showing pictures of a village as it once was, started an interesting discussion about whether it had been worth the money. No, said one child, because it's now all available for free on the internet. The idea of a memento of my visit also appealed to others.

Opportunities for a bit of leg pulling are always a delight. One photo in the book, taken in the 1930s, wooden chairs neatly ordered, shows children enjoying ice cream after a swim in the sea. What well behaved children they were in the 1930s, I said. Are you the kind of modern children that run freely around in restaurants yelling and screaming, I asked? Yes! They said, gleefully and loudly. Let me know when you're next dining out, and I'll make sure I don't go there, and we all laughed.

As a child, my parents would drag me around old houses and ruined castles. There were days when this was leg numbingly boring as we tramped from one gilded room to the next, until I started to imagine I lived there. I still do this. Delusions of grandeur? We could probably all do with a few sessions on the couch.

Childhood is filled with things we don't yet know will have an impact. One such, is the voice of Oliver Postgate, maker and narrator of *Ivor the Engine*, *The Clangers*, *Noggin the Nog* and *Bagpuss*. His was the voice of reassurance, and magical possibility. His own time at school was less than happy, and, brought up by a series of neglectful housemaids, he always felt that whatever he said or thought was wrong, coming to regard himself as "a nuisance". His 2007 interview with Kirsty Young for *Desert Island Discs* is worth the time, especially if Oliver's voice is lodged deep in your own childhood memories.

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/b007snc7>

Another such distinctive voice is that of Laurie Anderson, whose commentary on American life over many decades is playful and provocative. Recognising western culture as being driven by feelings of inadequacy, "so you always have to want something" (FT Weekend, 15/16 January 2022), Anderson's prolific output in painting, music, poetry, performance and more recently AI, always has something interesting to say. Over lockdown she created a series of six recorded lectures, available on YouTube which I find completely mesmerising. Whereas my mum's response to one of them was that "now we have speakers on YouTube etc that fail to grasp that their hands are in our faces being as they are nearest to the camera...[they] all wave their hands about in the most irritating way."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6LuKgGn5e2g>

The first time I heard Anderson was *O Superman*, released in 1981. She uses a vocoder which adds an eerie, other worldly sound to her already transfixing voice.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vkfpi2H8tOE>

In the attic of my mind, there is a connection in space-aged sounds as I rummage around my childhood memories, not just with the swanee whistle used to voice *The Clangers** (I have two swanee whistles in the pen pot on my desk), but also with the Theremin. Here is Clara Rockmore who, at the beginning of the 20th century, made the Russian and Soviet inventor Leon Theremin's** space age instrument famous

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pSzTPGINa5U>

Finally, after nearly 50 years of hankering after a Theremin, I have one. A purchase made possible from Christmas gift money from my mother-in-law, Sylvia.

It is devilishly difficult to play, and I gave possibly the first performance of the Theremin at St Paul's Cathedral School in Monday's assembly.

Weird sounds seem somehow to be in keeping with the mood of the nation: we're in weird times. We're back to the echo chamber of the anxiety of parenting in this competitive age, especially among those whose children are vying for places in their next schools.

As you might recollect, I'm doing this Heads dance thing. Among our number are Heads who run schools to which some of our children go on to, and others who run prep schools just out of town. One of them has 600 interviews to deal with in the next few weeks, another reports that some of her parents have spent so much time away from the social navigation of the office that their ability to pause and think before pressing send on WhatsApp or email has now completely evaporated. I've done it myself. Who hasn't?

And perhaps we shouldn't be too surprised. People in the knowledge economy especially have been strapped to their kitchen tables for almost two years, and the hours of work have increased. As we return to offices, that self-flagellating expectation of being **ALWAYS ON AND AVAILABLE** remains.

Only this week, Dawn and I were commenting on the phenomena of feeling **guilt** about being away from the computer, and even a new nervousness of meeting people in the flesh again.

As one parent suggested this week, we're in limbic mode **ALL THE TIME**.

The thing is, as Stephen Sondheim noted in *Into the Woods*, children will listen, and children do ventriloquise, and sometimes with devastating effects.

Let's laugh, instead.

This wonderful short film of musicians playing to a *Tom and Jerry* cartoon is pure pleasure in dealing with a stressful situation, complete with swanee whistle.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9piJKYvBFU>

Best wishes

Simon

* *Fascinating short film about the use of the swanee whistle vocalisation for The Clangers*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V2jHrqIMLko>

***Theremin also made listening devices which the Soviet intelligence agents managed to place in the US Ambassador's office in Moscow for some years.*