

## Palmerston North Boys' High School Assembly 29<sup>th</sup> June 2015



Thirty years ago I was the chair of a Southland trust which was established to fund and appoint a youth worker. The funds had been raised and the youth worker appointed. It was my task to find rental accommodation. I approached a retired farmer who I had been told, owned an ideal property. I'd not met the man before. At first meeting he seemed rather dour and a man of few words. When I had explained what I wanted, he cautiously asked, **"Who're the trustees?"** When I mentioned Jack Johnstone's name his response was immediate and animated. **"If Jack Johnstone's a trustee, the rental's yours."** He had bought his first tractor and every one he'd ever owned from Jack Johnstone." I've long forgotten the farmer's name and even what he looked like but I can still hear his response. "If Jack Johnstone's a trustee, the rental's yours." I knew exactly where he from was coming from. **Jack Johnstone is a man of impeccable integrity.**

The farmers knew from a lifetime of business dealings with Jack that he was honest and trustworthy. Jack's word is his bond. **Our forebears called those qualities "character."** Character is a word that we moderns are not comfortable with. A word search of newspapers will show that "character," in its Jack Johnstone sense, is seldom used. Character is the essential "stuff" that we are made of. It is our inner world where our thoughts, speech, decisions, relationships and behaviour are rooted. That is why ***character determines behaviour just as behaviour demonstrates character.*** The old farmer knew that Jack's character determined his business practices and that his business practices demonstrated his character.

***Character is what makes each of us a unique person.*** It is who we are at the heart of our being. The Ancient Hebrews had a great definition. They said that character is, ***"Who we are when no one sees."*** Character is about habits – "habits of the heart" – default positions. Character has only positive outcomes for the individual, the community and for society, although the effects of character are so far reaching – like the ripples that radiate from a stone thrown into a pond – the mechanics that make character work are simple.

- 1. Character is built from a comparatively small set of character values** which are held in common by all cultures and civilizations. These character **values include: respect, responsibility, honesty, kindness, compassion, concern, obedience [to rightful authority] and obligation, which the old-timers called duty.** These character values are part of all cultures.
- 2. Each of these character values is consistent, constant, universal and transcultural.** Honesty was honesty in 1015, honesty is honesty in 2015 and honesty will be honesty in 3015. Honesty is honesty in Panama, in Peru and in Palmerston North.

3. Turning these character values into character involves knowledge, desire/attitude and action/behaviour. ***Implementing character values involves the head [knowledge] the heart [desire/attitude] and the hand [behaviour/action.]***

Take, for example, compassion. To be compassionate, you must first know what compassion is. But just knowing what compassion is does not make you compassionate.

You must add to your knowledge of compassion, the desire to be compassionate. But knowledge plus desire of compassion does not make you compassionate. To be compassionate you have to act upon your desire to be compassionate. ***Your head, your heart and your hand are all required for you to be compassionate.*** To be compassionate you must practise compassion in your personal relationships and carry out your obligation [duty] as a citizen to help build a just, caring and compassionate society.

**Character is – knowing the good, desiring the good and doing the good.** As character values are practised they multiply. If you are honest with someone your honesty will be returned with trust, respect and loyalty. That is exactly what had happened between Jack Johnstone and his farmer client. Character values are gained as they are given and given as they are gained. There is nothing more sustainable than character values. ***This multiplication of character values is the reason why schools, classrooms and sports teams that intentionally present, model and advocate good character transform their culture.***

***Character is not something to have, like a smart phone, a skate board or label clothing. It is something to be, like honest, trustworthy and caring.*** Character is never simply inherited. Nor does it grow on its own like a weed. Character has to be formed and built in each individual. Each generation must produce its own Jack Johnstone's. **Character is critical in three areas: education, leadership and community wellbeing.**

1. **Character in Education.** Historically, the formation of character was seen as a major goal of education. That view stretched back through the centuries to the Greek teacher, Plato, who linked education with behaviour. For him, ***education was more than knowledge and skills.*** Samuel Johnstone was blunter. He warned, as others have since, that ***“Knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful.”*** Young people need character qualities such as diligence, a strong work ethic and a positive attitude in order to do their best in school and to succeed in life. They need honesty, respect and fairness in order to live and work with others.

Paul Tough recently reviewed current research on whether good performance in examinations was the best indicator of success in later life. ***He concluded that the qualities most likely to ensure a better degree, a better job, ultimately a more fulfilling life are perseverance, curiosity,***

**conscientiousness, optimism and self-control.** In other words – **character.** The danger of educating without character is highlighted in a letter that a school principal wrote to his teachers some years after the end of World War Two.

Dear Teacher

I am a survivor of a concentration camp. My eyes saw what no man should witness. Gas chambers built by learned engineers; children poisoned by educated physicians; infants killed by trained nurses; women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates. So I am suspicious of education. My request is; help your students become human. Your efforts must never produce learned monsters, skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmann's. Reading, writing and maths and all that schools seek to do are important only if they serve to make our children more human."

2. **Character is the key to Leadership.** This aspect of character is particularly significant as you begin the Sir Peter Blake Leadership Week and also because of Palmerston North Boys' High School's leadership programme and emphasis of educating young men of outstanding character. Leadership is about character. Leadership is about **who** you are not **what** you do. This simple truth about leadership and its link to character applies not just at the highest levels of political, business and professional leadership – but to the leadership of mums and dads, sports coaches and team captains, principals and teachers, managers and administrators, kaumatua and community leaders and everyone who has influence over the lives of others.

Leadership is about unlocking the potential of others. That requires – integrity, honesty, trust, respect, responsibility, and fairness - character. Character provides the leader's greatest motivation to do what is right and the strongest restraint against doing wrong. The first prompting to do what is good is the leader's character and the last barrier to doing what is wrong is the leader's character. *There has never been a time when there were more books, courses, programmes, assessment tools about leadership. Yet the paradox is that leadership seldom fails because of lack of knowledge, it fails because of deficits of character.* Character provides the essential link of trust between leaders and followers. Character is the leader's deepest motivation and the strongest source of restraint.

3. **Character and the Community.** All of us, regardless our circumstances, want to live in a just, caring and decent society. We want to live in communities – whether those communities are families, schools or neighbourhoods – where folk look out for each other, are respectful, trustworthy and are good neighbours. But we want, what we cannot possibly have, unless we **first** build citizens of good character. One writer illustrated our dilemma by asking us to imagine opening a person's chest and removing the heart and expecting the lungs and liver, the brain and the kidney, to function as if the heart is still pumping. We want what we have made impossible unless we first build a

community reservoir of citizens of character. Failure to build character imposes enormous economic, social and personal costs on communities. Most of the behaviours that fracture our families, communities and relationships like, for example, discrimination and abuse – in all its forms, result from deficits of character. I never fail but to be encouraged by three lines in Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.

“I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will **not** be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character.”

For me those inspiring lines say all that there is to say about character and society because in them, Martin Luther King, puts first things first.

### **Conclusion**

The best character education is that which makes us keenly aware that it is our own character that is at stake. Each of us, like Jack Johnstone, must build our own character. There are three questions that will help us build our character and become the best person that we can be.

1. What sort of a person do I want to be?
2. What sort of a person am I becoming?
3. How do I want to live with others?

Our character is not about great leaders like Sir Peter Blake, Sir Harold Barrowclough or even Jack Johnstone. It’s about us. Reputation is what others think of us, character is what we are deep inside. If we take care of our character our reputation will take care of itself.

### **The Man in the Glass**

When you get what you want in your struggle for self  
And the world makes you king for a day,  
Just go to the mirror and look at yourself,  
And see what that man has to say.

For it isn't your father or mother or wife,  
Who judgment upon you must pass;  
The fellow whose verdict counts most in your life  
Is the one staring back from the glass.

He's the fellow to please, never mind all the rest.  
For he's with you clear up to the end,  
And you've passed the most dangerous, difficult test  
If the man in the glass is your friend.

You may be like Jack Horner and "chisel" a plum,  
And think you're a wonderful guy,  
But the man in the glass says you're only a bum  
If you can't look him straight in the eye.

You may fool the whole world down the pathway of years.  
And get pats on the back as you pass,  
But your final reward will be the heartaches and tears  
If you've cheated the man in the glass.

Dale Wimbrow 1895-1954

**My hope is that one day someone will  
hear your name and say, "That's good  
enough for me."**

John Heenan  
Palmerston North Boys' High School  
Leadership Assembly  
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