Choosing to Think Uniquely

Distinguished guests The Right Reverend Dr Peter Stuart, Mr Keith Lynch, The Very Reverend Stephen Williams, The Board, Mrs Erica Thomas, teachers and staff, parents and students, thank you for inviting me to participate in your school speech day.

I will endeavour to do honour to your tradition and to provide some inspiration as you reflect on, the year that has been, 2014 and as you prepare for the year ahead whatever that may entail for you.

Your Dr John Miller, Deputy Chairman of the School Board, recently suggested to me that I have, a “unique way of thinking”. He graciously assured me it was a compliment!

Intrigued by this insight I have chosen to explore this characteristic as the topic of my address…”Choosing to Think Uniquely”.

And so, I would like to share with you, some perspectives on the topic.

• I will discuss my concern that our current thinking does not appear to assist us solve age-old problems, and why I believe our thought processes are essential to solve problems in new ways.
• I would like to reflect, on some inspiring and well-known figures, who have solved problems uniquely, in unexpected or novel ways and on how they achieved this.
• I will alert you to an observation. That many people seem to abandon unique thought for fear of being different; and
• Finally I would like to invite you to consider what your role may be.

I would contend, that at an individual and a societal level, our actions, choices and words originate from our thoughts and that before we can start to address the issues and problems of our time, we must first consciously understand the importance of our thoughts.

To be clear, our thoughts are the origin, the seed, of our choices, words and actions.

I observe that our broader community is not successfully solving many of the problems which impact our wellbeing. Consider these:

• Peace continues to elude us, with the number of conflicts across the world continuing to increase from 15 (in 1945) to 35 (in 2014). This is a 60 year trend upwards.
• Housing and income are unevenly distributed. The Australian Council of Social Services reported this year that 2.5M or 14% of our Australian population is living below the International Poverty Line. 603,000 of these are children.
• Pollution is increasing, unemployment, social disconnection and incidents of mental ill-health are rising,
• yet business is recording unprecedented profits.

But if you were to ask politicians, business people, students, activists and even workers queuing at the coffee counter, regardless of their background they would likely express an interest in these issues being solved. People from all walks of life speak about possible solutions to address these key human concerns. But clearly, the way our society is approaching these problems is not proving effective. Surely, if our approach were effective, we would be experiencing positive changes in our wellbeing indicators. But this is not a new problem.
Many great philosophers and thinkers have pondered society’s apparent inability to secure lasting solutions that deliver peace, health and fair distribution of resources.

John Stuart Mill, the great 19th century philosopher, economist and reformer, observed the importance and need for thought to be the origin of improvement. Mills asserted that “No great improvements in the lot of mankind are possible until change takes place in our thoughts.”

I would like to suggest to you, that our societies, need to become consciously aware of the importance and power of thought.

We need individuals to harness their thoughts in order to solve our human issues in new, unique ways. Our thoughts can be viewed as a kind of currency which we all have access to and ought to value.

It is fortunate that, our world has been blessed with many people who have thought in unique ways. Their courage to manifest their thoughts into effective words and positive actions, provides us with insight into the power and effectiveness of unique thought.

Nelson Mandela, who spent 27 years in prison for his protest against the discriminatory practices of the South African Apartheid regime, explains in his memoirs how he derived power from his ability to think differently. In particular, he explains how he consciously thought through the possible options of how he would respond when he was finally set free. And this is what he did. He chose to forgive his captors, who had treated him so poorly. He considered and chose to refuse to hate. So, while his time in prison removed many freedoms, it afforded him the opportunity to think and consider his options. His eventual thoughtful choices were unique and inspirational and as we now know, the words and actions that followed his release, became the catalyst for liberating his nation and introducing democracy.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the inspirational Burmese leader who was placed under house arrest for 7 years by the military to prevent her participation in democratic process, articulates in her writings, that deep meditative thought enabled her to see her imprisonment in a different way. It is novel to note, that she actually thanked the military for giving her 7 years of rest, because it allowed her to be full of energy to continue her work once she was freed. She completely redefined her captivity and addressed the power imbalance. What insight, intelligence and inspiration!

There is no doubt, that the circumstances which led both Mandela and Aung San Suu Kyi into deep and creative thought, were extreme. The situations in which they found themselves and their communities were prolonged and desperate. I suspect their circumstances and problems were far from the reality of most of our life experiences. But I would like to bring this discussion closer to home because although our problems may seem mundane by comparison, they are no less significant for our community.

So how do we stimulate deep thought to find unique solutions to the emerging challenges of our own community today and in the future?

Perhaps a former Australian leader may help inspire us. Gough Whitlam, Australia 21st prime minister who passed away this year, was celebrated at his state memorial service for the many reforms he introduced to Australia while in office. Gough Whitlam’s reforms included addressing educational and health service inequality, racial discrimination and instituting laws to ensure equality for women.

A good friend of Gough Whitlams, Noel Pearson, lawyer and indigenous community leader, delivered a thought provoking eulogy in which he challenged all Australians to think about how it was that someone with Gough’s middle class comfortable upbringing, who had never actually experienced discrimination, poor access to health, education and other services had such a conviction to change the barriers of class and race that existed in Australia at the time.
As a result of his friendship, Noel Pearson was able to answer his own question, by explaining that, Gough Whitlam had a remarkable capacity for deep compassion and empathy. So much so that he could not only view societal problems, but could actually feel their impact on his fellow humans. This kind of insight begins with considered thought and requires being true to oneself.

So, the approach of Mr Whitlam gives us a model. I would suggest, that once we actually allows ourselves to truly feel the impact and consequence of a problem, then we can hardly avoid becoming internally motivated to understand why that problem exists. Then, through that understanding we are well placed, to seek out unique solutions.

Students, fortunately, you find yourself in a very positive and nurturing educational environment. I note that from preschool to senior school you are very much encouraged to actively reflect upon your experience and knowledge, to consider diverse ideas, concepts and possibilities and to grow into your unique selves. This is a powerful base from which considered thinking can emerge.

But don’t be misled, the value, that this school community places on thought and considered problem solving is not commonly valued, or even consciously considered in all communities and in my experience, not in all organisations.

The Rev Martin Luther King, the famous American civil rights activist, observed that “rarely do we find people willing to engage in hard, solid thinking”. He expressed concern, in his time, that he saw “an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions”. He went so far as to say that “for some people nothing pains them more than having to think”. Is this still the case? You may have your own view, I suspect it is so and would like to ask why?

When we think on an issue, especially if we think with compassion and empathy with a view to finding solutions, do we run the risk that we will emerge with ideas and beliefs divergent to others, that will be different? Being different, can be awkward even isolating. I caution that we need to honestly acknowledge this possibility, that is, that our unique thoughts may isolate us at times. It may be, that many people choose consciously or unconsciously to avoid the risk of being different by simply following the group think and in doing so one gives up their opportunity for independent thought.

I believe that when an individual’s thoughts are not shared this is a lost opportunity. And I therefore invite you to consider that in such circumstances we lose the chance to explore new and unique alternate solutions and thereby to benefit from them. Albert Einstein counselled us on this point when he said “Everything you can imagine is real” which I would say means everything you think, every thought... is possible.

One of the recurring themes that have emerged in my discussions with your school leaders, was that, the students of Newcastle Grammar, on the whole, possess a strong sense of responsibility and service, a desire to contribute meaningfully to society and to your own and outside communities. These are admirable traits.

And so, it is appropriate to encourage you to be conscious of your thoughts. To remain open to examine new ideas, to question why, until you feel you have real understanding of an issue and of its impacts.

Deep understanding will provide fertile ground for unique solutions in any of life’s endeavours.

It is a real strength to be able to harness your unique experiences in order to explore the broadest possible understanding and solutions to any problem.
Therefore, I encourage you to be courageous. Especially at times when you realise your thoughts, choices, words and actions differ from those around you. You will need to determine if the risk of standing alone with your unique thoughts, is worth taking? Pick your times to be courageous and be courageous.

In my experience, I feel qualified to assure you of one final point.

As a participant in this life, each of you has a unique contribution to make because you and your thoughts are unique.