

PRIZE GIVING SPEECH

TUESDAY 25 JANUARY 2011

Thank you Mr. Barker for those kind words of introduction and for the opportunity and indeed the honour of addressing this particular gathering today.

Mr Barker, esteemed colleagues, ladies and gentleman – Good morning.

It also gives me great pleasure to congratulate all our prize winners as well as every boy who performed to the best of his ability in 2010. I'd like today's celebration of achievement to also serve as an opportunity for inspiration, especially to those boys who may have resigned themselves to a "prize-less" level of performance.

It would be a mistake to see events like this one as a celebration ONLY of the top achievers and award recipients. Today is very much about each boy here taking stock of the results of his labour, attitude and motivation. Each boy here needs to be asking himself about the way forward. Each boy here has the potential and the opportunity to be the recipient of future awards. Today is about affirmation and seeking inspiration. It is about the future as much as it is an acknowledgement of the past. But most importantly, it is about the present. And the power each of us has to CREATE new possibilities from this moment forward.

With this in mind, I have three main points on which I wish to focus this morning:

1. The power of Choice
2. The Setting of Goals based on values
3. Being passionate about what we do

I beg your indulgence as I use the excellent achievement of my daughter during last year to bring about my first point. In 2005 at the end of her grade 7 year, we agreed as a family to place her in an Islamic institute of Higher learning to strengthen her understanding of our religion, as well as build her understanding of Islamic values and ethics. She therefore spent 4 years studying 15 subjects that addressed Theology, Arabic, Quran, Islamic History, etc. but excluded the usual mainstream curriculum.

In addition, we home schooled her to complete her external Grade 9 exams. In all this time my daughter's performance was never more than average. Having graduated from her course in 2009, she went back into mainstream education for Grade 10 last year.

What a surprise to us therefore, when in addition to her overall excellent performance in grade 10, not only did she achieve an 'A' symbol in Physical Sciences, she also won the Physics, Arabic and Life Orientation prize at her school!

I am sure that the many proud parents here today, can understand what an extremely proud father *I* was at that prize-giving.

I was absolutely thrilled!

Of course, partly more so because Physical Science is my subject (!) and I am very aware of the challenges that students need to overcome to excel in it, but mainly because she had not been in a mainstream educational environment for 4years, and had never excelled as a student before. It prompted me to ask her why she had done so well –particularly in Physical Sciences.

I expected her to say “Well, I took charge of my own academic progress, set my goals high, started working from the outset, with complete dedication and commitment and achieved what I set out to do.”

This is the formula for achievement that we are taught, and that we expect has brought others their success.

However, she surprised me again by simply saying, “I wanted to do well.”

I suddenly got it: she had made a CHOICE to do well. And THAT had Power.

We make choices all the time, from the moment we wake up until we go to bed:

- Do I go to school or do I get my mom to call the school and say that I am sick?
- Do I get a late slip from the downstairs office or do I try and sneak into period one without being noticed?
- Do I listen attentively in class or do I attempt to instant message my friend at Rustenburg?
- Do I write my own code of conduct or do I photocopy my friend's one?
- And for me, do I drink coke when I'm thirsty or listen to my wife urging me to drink water!

These are some of the choices that we don't even realise we are making. What we must begin to acknowledge is that the choices we make can bring us CLOSER TO or take us FURTHER AWAY from our dreams, our goals.

I would like to urge each of you to become aware of the Choice you have at any given moment- the choice you have right now, right this minute.

Your actions do not merely need to be habit, routine, ritual or whatever the herd decides. Choice is a powerful tool that, when used with consciousness, opens possibilities that were NEVER going to happen.

Choice distinguishes us from animals. It allows us to go beyond Instinct, Need and Desire and makes Determination, Striving and Excelling available to each person who enables Choice.

The clever student is the one who consciously makes clever choices.

Take a moment to look at the choices you need to make in your life...

In your studies...in your family life...in your friendships...what kind of clever choices are you going to make?

So what happens after you have made powerful, positive choices? Well to achieve any real result in reality, Choices must be followed by actions aligned with that choice.

However, the quality of the choices we make, and the effectiveness of the actions we take are determined by how clearly defined our goals are and the extent of our focus on those goals.

Goal setting is a powerful tool that facilitates the achievement of our dreams. It helps us to focus our attention, to organize our time and to use our resources optimally.

And since success breeds success, Goals that are achieved, motivate us to achieve even more and boost our belief in our own ability, creating a boldness to strive beyond the limits we may have set for ourselves.

However, a crucial element to effective goal setting is creating goals based on values. This means we need to adopt a broader view of our achievement. What do our achievements add up to in a lifetime? Ultimately, what is my life about? What are the values I live by that inform my goals, my choices, my actions?

The following example will illustrate what I mean. I knew somebody during my study at UCT that needed to achieve 92% in the fourth module of his Math 3 exam in order to obtain an overall 50% pass in Math. This tells us that his results at that point were rather low. He could score 92% or spend another year doing Math! Determined not to repeat a year, he chose to write the exam and set his goal to obtain the required 92%. Given his record, this was a brave even audacious choice.

To his own surprise and the surprise of all who knew him, he achieved exactly 92% and passed.

Now we will all agree that his mark of 92% was an excellent achievement, but it ONLY allowed for a BASIC PASS OF 50%. His overall achievement was therefore mediocre. What does this say about his values in life? His ABILITY was clearly not in question. He had simply not been present to choosing his VALUES and setting his goals from those values. Instead, as many of us do, he operated from the goal determined by the urgent need to pass THAT exam at THAT moment.

Did he take the right action? Of course! But, given his ability, what would have been available to him, had he set value based goals from the outset? How would he have experienced himself if he had achieved those kinds of results throughout his studies?

When we set goals based on values then there is an overall improvement in who we are and in all aspects of our lives. If, for example, we declare Service as a life goal, we will cause ourselves to be of service in every situation we are in.

Helping others would always be our choice; our communities would count on us to be available to serve; we would start to know ourselves as people who contribute. Not only will our self image and confidence grow, our families, schools, neighbourhoods, indeed our nation, would thrive!

If we declare Excellence as our life goal, then every area of our life will be an opportunity for excellence to show up: our academic results would be excellent, our sporting achievements would be excellent, our relationships would be excellent, the way in which we speak, our conduct and our dress would be excellent.

This brings me to my third point: Being Passionate in what we do.

When we experience ourselves as successful, achieving what we've set out to achieve, we start to enjoy our success and the striving becomes fun. The opposite is also true: when we strive in what we enjoy, we have fun while we learn and success becomes available. Passion can be developed from either end. When we use our skills and talents to do something meaningful and significant in our lives, we develop Passion.

Being Passionate is also a choice. It is the choice we make to bring enthusiasm, commitment and enjoyment to those value-based goals we have set.

When we are passionate we do things to the best of our ability. We do more than what is required. We are positive and enthusiastic. We inspire others by our example. Passion is contagious. It is a life force that brings about all manner of advancement.

It is that which makes us know we are ALIVE!

In closing, let me quote Edgar Albert Guest:

“You are the fellow who has to decide.
Whether you'll do it or toss it aside;
You are the person who makes up your mind.
Whether you'll lead or will linger behind.
Whether you'll try for the goal that's afar.
Or just be contented to stay where you are.”

We all have the Power of Choice and that is exactly what Choice is: POWER. Regarding academic progress, sporting excellence or Life itself, each and every one of us has the choice to be excellent or mediocre.

What do you choose?