

Enthusiasm

Assembly by Sally Rowley, Head of Sixth Form, UCAS and Higher Education, September 2019

This week's assembly starts with a word. It's a commonplace word that you hear every day. That word is enthusiasm.

We've all read (and some of us have written) those school reports which say 'so and so has shown real enthusiasm for this subject' or 'such and such is not very enthusiastic about his studies' but the word has an origin which is far more profound than its ubiquity or 'commonplaceness' might suggest.

The word enthusiasm has its roots in ancient Greek - the word *enthousiasmós*, originally meant possession by a god or having a god within. That's the 'thoo' bit of the word. It's where theo as in 'theology' comes from.

Think about words that *you* think mean the same as enthusiasm.

- Eagerness?
- Warmth?
- Fervor?
- Zeal?
- Passion?

All are good synonyms but none them is as effective once you know that enthusiasm means with god.

Way back in 2011 I took the opportunity to go to a series of science lectures in Bristol headlined by the TV physicist Professor Brian Cox. There were lots of energetic speakers; they talked about subjects as diverse as

- particle physics and the Hadron Collider,
- how drug companies manipulate data,
- the structure of the brain
- and the exploration of the universe.

Every speaker was enthusiastic about their subject and I've rarely been in an audience which shared so much of that enthusiasm.

The irony of these *scientists* talking with *enthusiasm*, that is 'with god', struck me forcibly on the way home. And it was compounded the next morning when I was telling my year eleven English class about the lectures I'd heard the evening before. One boy was amazed that I should have spent my evening listening to scientists mouthing off about their pet projects. 'Why did *you* bother going to hear that?' he asked '*you* teach English.'

There lies the problem; this modern determination to divide and therefore diminish knowledge. It reduces and marginalizes our understanding of the world and in so doing, gives us less room to operate with enthusiasm, with God.

It wasn't always this way. Early philosophers felt no need to divide their learning into subjects but now we are all forced to make choices which appear to close some learning opportunities.

Most of the people here this morning will have trooped around an options evening choosing subjects for GCSE. If you haven't done it yet, you will. Quite soon. And it feels like a momentous occasion. *I* remember doing *my* option choices and thinking quite clearly 'Hurrah! I never need to sit through another Physics lesson as long as I live!' but ticking those column choices narrows things down.

Now I'm a teacher, it troubles me when I hear students say 'Oh I don't need to study that poem, it won't come up in the exam'. or 'I'd like to drop an A level, UCAS will only make an offer based on three.' That *cannot* be what learning is all about. I'm not against specialization but have you noticed how the best specialists are the ones with the bigger picture?

This need to specialize can result in the tendency to polarise. By this I mean that people increasingly seem to hold rather absolute views. For instance it's either science OR religion. Any middle ground is an uneasy space that seems to smack of feeble mindedness or lack of resolve.

This polarization was inevitably true of those scientists who spoke in the Colston Hall that night I mentioned before – most were desperately keen to denigrate or put down any smidgeon of spirituality just as the most ardent creationists will deny the most persuasive scientific evidence. But that evening of science finished with Professor Cox talking about a photograph – the one you were given when you came in – and it is on that photograph that I want to dwell for a few moments. Have a good look at it...

This photo is known as The Pale Blue Dot. Look carefully. You should be able to see a speck of dust in a beam of light. There's a circle around it so you can see it more easily. The pale blue dot is not very blue in this version but that's more to do with my photocopying skills.

Look carefully.

The Pale Blue Dot is a photograph of planet Earth taken in 1990 by Voyager 1 from a record distance, showing it against the vastness of space. Seen from 6.1 billion kilometers (3.7 billion miles), Earth appears as a tiny dot within the darkness of deep space.

By the request of Carl Sagan, the cosmologist, NASA commanded the Voyager 1 spacecraft, having completed its primary mission and now leaving the Solar System, to turn its camera around and to take a photograph of Earth across a great expanse of space.

Between February 14, 1990 and June 6, 1990, one image *Voyager* returned was of Earth, showing up as a "pale blue dot" in the grainy photograph.

Reflections by Sagan

Speaking on October 13th 1994 Sagan pointed out that "all of human history has happened on that tiny pixel, which is our only home."

Carl Sagan went on to say:

**From this distant vantage point, the Earth might not seem of particular interest. But for us, it's different. Look again at that dot. That's here, that's home, that's us. On it everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there - on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam.*

The Earth is a very small stage in a vast cosmic arena. Think of the rivers of blood spilled by all those generals and emperors so that, in glory and triumph, they could become the momentary masters of a fraction of a dot. Think of the endless cruelties visited by the inhabitants of one corner of this pixel on the scarcely distinguishable inhabitants of some other corner, how frequent their misunderstandings, how eager they are to kill one another, how fervent their hatreds.

Our posturings, our imagined self-importance, the delusion that we have some privileged position in the Universe, are challenged by this point of pale light. Our planet is a lonely speck in the great enveloping cosmic dark. In our obscurity, in all this vastness, there is no hint that help will come from elsewhere to save us from ourselves.

The Earth is the only world known so far to harbour life. There is nowhere else, at least in the near future, to which our species could migrate. Visit, yes. Settle, not yet. Like it or not, for the moment the Earth is where we make our stand.

*It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world. To me, it underscores our responsibility to deal more kindly with one another, and to preserve and cherish the pale blue dot, the only home we've ever known.**

The combination of Carl Sagan's profound words with the photograph of the pale blue dot is a salutary lesson to be expansive, to embrace, to be inclusive. It also gives us the opportunity to be enthusiastic, with God, in the best sense of the word. If we can cultivate the god within ourselves, perhaps then we can have the vision to appreciate and understand the wonders of the universe.