

Unkind Banter

Assembly by Alastair Tighe, Head Master, February 2019

Many of you will remember that in September, towards the start of the Michaelmas Term, we were visited by a team of inspectors. They came as part of their regular cycle of visits to all schools, to ensure that we were meeting our statutory obligations as a School. The most recent inspection, therefore, didn't therefore make any qualitative judgments about the School, as any of you who have read the report will have seen. Prior to our September inspection, the last time the School was inspected was in 2014. On that occasion a much more thorough report followed the visit of the inspectors, one which did make qualitative judgments and one which provided a commentary on just about every aspect of school life.

The report then commented positively on a whole host of things about our School and we can rightly take pride in its findings. But that report was written almost five years ago. Many of us were not even in the School at the time. And so I wonder whether what was found then would still hold true today?

As with all these things, the devil is often in the detail. When commenting on the way pupils in 2014 behaved towards each other, the inspectors observed and noted, and I quote, *"Pupils act with respect and tolerance towards each other. They are courteous and well behaved, displaying confidence without arrogance, and taking pride in their school...and are ready to take their place as good citizens in society."*

These are wonderful things to have said either about any pupils. We should all rightly be proud that these things have been said about our School, and must work hard to continue to uphold such standards – certainly, we should all be quick to challenge anyone who does not demonstrate these attributes today.

But I'd also like to challenge you today to consider two things: firstly, would the inspectors say the same thing about you as a pupil body today, five years on? And secondly, would they say the same things today about each and everyone of you specifically, you as an individual?

Whilst you are pondering this, I'd like you to consider how you would respond in the light of a theme I touched on before the break – that of so-called banter and our choice of language when talking with or about people.

In another school's recent inspection report, the following was stated: *"pupils understand that unkind banter disguised as wit is unacceptable"*. They wrote this when commenting on those pupils' understanding of what constitutes bullying: *"pupils understand that unkind banter disguised as wit is unacceptable"*.

Just how true do you think this is in our School?

I suppose if we were being pedantic, the statement probably is literally true – I do believe that the vast majority of you, if not all of you, do 'understand' that unkind banter disguised as wit is not appropriate or acceptable. If you were asked directly whether it was ever acceptable, I'm sure you would all say no. But, as is so often the case, actions speak louder than words, and too often we are all aware of instances when people engage in what they consider to be harmless 'banter' but which is actually very unkind or distressing for others. Certainly, these people probably don't mean to be unkind, but unfortunately too often we don't think about the consequences of what we say or do 'in so-called jest' before it's too late. Because too often we underestimate by our unthinking behaviour just how powerful the words we use can be – for both good and for ill.

St James acknowledged this in the extract from his letter which we have just heard read. He talks about the tongue being small in size but great in influence, like the rudder of a ship or the ability of what starts as a small fire to destroy a whole forest. "From the same mouth come blessing and cursing", he writes.

So how might we go about ensuring that what we say is always a blessing and not a curse. How can we be encouraged to think carefully about the consequences of our potential banter before we say something which is actually upsetting to another person – even if that person doesn't necessarily seem upset at the time?

Can I suggest that you test your proposed banter by imagining this – what would happen if your words and actions were viewed by people outside your close circle of friends? How would people who don't know you personally pass judgement on your behaviour? Taken to an extreme, what if your so-called banter was filmed, broadcast around the world via social media outlets within seconds, added to the TV news headlines, and commented on publicly by people including shop-keepers to newspaper editors, taxi drivers to politicians? How would you then feel about what you had done? If you aren't prepared for your actions to be scrutinised by other people, then I suggest you should stop yourself before you say anything.

To illustrate my point, I want us all to consider one fairly recent infamous example of so-called banter that did indeed hit the global headlines and attract comment from all sorts of people around the world. It occurred during the last US presidential election campaign, when the now elected Donald Trump stood at a podium in a campaign rally and mimicked the actions of a disabled reporter from the New York Times. He was supposedly imitating Serge Kovalski, who has a chronic condition which affects the movement of his arms.

Within hours, footage of what he had done was being watched by millions of people around the world – and it attracted public and media outrage.

It also, perhaps most noticeably, prompted Hollywood actress Meryl Streep to refer to Trump's behaviour in a speech she gave when accepting a lifetime achievement award at last year's Golden Globes. Her words also attracted global attention – but perhaps for all the right reasons, as opposed to Trump's. This is what she had to say about the episode:

“There was one performance this year that stunned me. It sank its hooks in my heart. Not because it was good. There was nothing good about it. But it was effective and it did its job. It made its intended audience laugh and show their teeth. It was that moment when the person asking to sit in the most respected seat in our country imitated a disabled reporter, someone he outranked in privilege, power, and the capacity to fight back. It kind of broke my heart when I saw it. I still can't get it out of my head because it wasn't in a movie. It was real life.

And this instinct to humiliate, when it's modelled by someone in the public platform, by someone powerful, it filters down into everybody's life, because it kind of gives permission for other people to do the same thing. Disrespect invites disrespect. Violence incites violence. When the powerful use their position to bully others, we all lose.”

All of us, in our own ways, find ourselves in positions of power each and every day – be they formal posts, or just as a consequence of our interactions with other people. We all, therefore, have the potential to build other people up, or to knock them down cruelly and without sensitivity. So next time you're tempted to engage in banter, no matter how harmless it may appear to you initially, consider the words of Meryl Streep – take care to ensure that your understanding that unkind banter disguised as wit is unacceptable actually translates into the way you behave and conduct yourself on a daily basis. And by extension, take care to ensure that everything you do helps to build up our community rather than knock it down, that your daily action and behaviour ensures that every single member of our School feels equally respected and accepted. And don't just think it – do it – because actions speak louder than words.