

“What’s In Your Head That You Didn’t Put There?”

Assembly by Helen Gray, Head of Chemistry and Assistant Head of Lower Sixth, June 2025

Good morning, everyone.

Now, standing here in this majestic Cathedral, surrounded by stone, history, and quiet. A place designed to make us think bigger thoughts.

You might be expecting a sermon or a grand proclamation. But I promise – no fire, no brimstone, no guilt. Just a good old-fashioned brain teaser... and a few surprises.

So today, let’s do just that.

Let me start with a quick riddle:

A father and his son are in a terrible car crash.
The father dies at the scene.
The boy is rushed to hospital.
The surgeon looks at him and says,
“I can’t operate on this boy. He’s my son.”

How is this possible?

The answer? The surgeon is **his mother**.

Some of you might’ve got that straight away. But many people don’t. Even adults. Even doctors.

That moment of confusion – that little mental glitch – is a perfect example of something scientists call **unconscious bias**.

Unconscious bias is when your brain makes an assumption based on stereotypes – without asking your permission.

It’s like an app you didn’t download that’s running in the background, draining your battery.

And the thing is, our brains love shortcuts. If we had to think hard about every single decision, we’d never get out the door in the morning.

Scientists have studied this a lot. Our brains are wired to take shortcuts – it's efficient. But sometimes, those shortcuts are built from old information. Wrong information. Outdated information.

Imagine your brain as a giant library. You're in charge, the librarian. But there's this sneaky assistant slipping books onto the shelves while you're not looking – books full of outdated or biased ideas.

Then one day, without even knowing it, you find yourself quoting from one of them.

So how does this work with **gender**?

Research shows that by the age of **six**, many girls have already absorbed the idea that boys are “naturally smarter.” Not because anyone told them directly, but because of what they saw and heard around them.

Here's a real example. A female scientist I know took her 4-year-old daughter to work. The girl saw a man in a white lab coat and said,

"Look, mummy – a real scientist!"

Her mum, also in a lab coat, standing right next to her... didn't count.

That's bias, absorbed by age four.

Even technology picks it up. Google once found its voice assistant responded better to male voices. Why? Because it had been trained on recordings where men gave most of the commands. Even AI isn't immune – because we trained it.

And it doesn't stop there. In one study, people were played two identical pieces of music and told one was performed by a man, the other by a woman. Same music. But guess which one got better reviews?

“John” got more praise than “Jane” – even though they were the same recording.

Our ears heard what our brains expected.

You might be thinking, “I'm not biased. I treat everyone the same.”

That's great. But unconscious bias isn't something you choose. It's something you notice – and then choose to question.

And it matters.

And it matters because it affects decisions – who gets hired, who gets listened to in meetings, who we think of as “leadership material,” even who we picture when we hear the word “genius.” In school, in sport, in work, even in friendships – bias can sneak in.

And here’s the twist: you’re not a bad person if you have bias. You’re just human.

Now before you despair and think we’re all doomed to be robots of bias, good news: you can reprogram. The key is awareness. Once you see the bias, you can challenge it.

Step one: **Notice it.** When something feels “off” or “surprising,” ask yourself, “Is that because of bias?”

Step two: **Interrupt it.** Before deciding someone’s “not the leader type” or “probably not good at maths,” pause. What makes you think that? Is it you, or that cheeky library assistant?

Step three: **Feed your brain better stories.** Watch films, read books, follow people who break stereotypes – female engineers, male nurses, non-binary artists, stay-at-home dads, female CEOs. Let your brain update its library.

And lastly: **Be kind when you mess up.** If you catch yourself thinking a biased thought, don’t panic. Don’t get defensive. Just say: “Ah. Old wiring. Time to upgrade.”

Standing in this great space, under these soaring ceilings, you might wonder – what does all this have to do with a Cathedral?

Well – look up. These arches, these stones – were built by men who had to imagine something beyond what already existed.

Challenging unconscious bias is just like that: it’s seeing the shape of something better, even when the world around you still leans on the old patterns.

So be the kind of person who rewrites those patterns.

Let your brain be curious.

Let your choices be fair. Let’s build something more inclusive in our own heads.

Let’s be the generation that notices, that questions, that reshapes what we think we know.

Because if bias can sneak into our brains without asking, fairness can too.

And the next time your brain says, “That doesn’t look right,” try asking it: “Or have I just never seen it properly before?”

Thank you.