



St Leonard's College
An education for life.

From the Principal

Peter Clague



What Do You Expect?

Once upon a time, in a small island nation where rugby was the dominant religion and there were more sheep than people, an unremarkable young boy grew up and went to school. It was the 1970's, an embarrassing decade, now banished from the history books because nothing eventful happened during those drab years other than some appalling hairstyles which were a crime against humanity.

The young boy's name was Peter and the school he went to is immaterial, other than to say that it was an average school. Which is much worse than being a bad school. At least bad schools are ultimately fixed or closed. Average schools just trudge along the well-worn paths of the status quo, fearful of any deviation that may plunge them into a dark and scary land called Tomorrow. Average schools are usually led by average Principals and staffed by average teachers. Well-intentioned souls who nevertheless shy away from taking a tilt at excellence, content enough with each new day bringing neither calamity nor risk.

To be fair, young Peter enjoyed his time in his average school. Nonetheless, he suffered there, although he did not realise it until years later. Not through ill-treatment; Peter was far from perfect and undoubtedly deserved the many punishments that were dished out. To this day, he regrets the incident with the Bunsen burner and the dissected rabbit, which drove his Biology teacher to abandon his profession. Nor did he suffer through undue pressure or unrealistic expectations pushing him to breaking point. Far from it. Fanciful notions of excellence were unheard of in the 1970's. No, the nature of his abuse was mediocrity. Of the institutional variety. A prevailing ethos that 'near enough was good enough'.

As a result, he was shielded from the crushing disappointments of failing to get A grades, losing tournament finals, or forgetting his lines on opening night. Not because such opportunities didn't exist, but because nobody really expected him to partake. Our story takes place even before the era of cotton-wool parenting and the snowflake generation. This is simply a tale of colourless indifference, set in a time of low aspiration. Not that our young protagonist brought much rigour to the party himself. His Mathematics teacher once wrote in a school report "Peter will succeed in spite of himself." Yet teenagers aren't wired to make life hard for themselves, that's the job of their parents and teachers. At that age, high standards work best when they are expected by others.

Don't get the violins out just yet though, for there is a happy ending. In his final year of school, just as a life of unchallenging monotony was looming, an inspiring teacher tore up young Peter's carefully handwritten application for a horribly mundane job in front of his eyes and replaced it with a university prospectus. So shocked was he at this show of faith, it didn't occur to him that he might not be good enough to go there. He just dutifully left and did what was expected. That led to 36 years in a rich and fulfilling career, which sees him, today, proud to work in a College that is anything but average.

I may have missed out on an inspiring secondary education, but I did learn a lasting lesson in those distinctly average years. Namely, that expectations are self-fulfilling. Young people will, invariably, rise or fall to the expectations that are held of them. Show a child that you think they are likely to fail, and they will happily oblige. Demonstrate that you genuinely think they will succeed, and same is true. Most of us go into new situations alert for cues as to what might be expected of us. What might be considered the norm. Show young people that you genuinely anticipate they will be proficient, or engaged, or respectful, or any other admirable quality and, in my experience, they will be. Sadly, the same is true of signals, even subliminal ones, that you think they will struggle, rebel, misbehave, or aren't good enough.

That's why we don't spend an undue amount of time at St Leonard's lecturing young people about the things they can't, shouldn't, or must not do. That speaks of an expectation that they will transgress. From ELC to the Senior School, the messages are of high expectation, not low. Spoken and subliminal. We try to show to every child that we automatically presume good intent on their part. That we expect extraordinary feats from them. That we are convinced they possess a unique flair. They rarely let us down.

As for the now-not-so-young Peter, he is eternally grateful for the power of aspiration, remains terrified of mediocrity, refuses to employ average teachers, and always encourages the Science Department to lock up their Bunsen burners.