



From the Principal

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“You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.”

- Jon Kabat-Zinn



“We’re All Going To Die”

Given my upbringing, I am mildly surprised to still be alive. Not that I was unduly reckless or my parents neglectful. But society in the seventies, and my school in particular, did a pretty good job of convincing young people that we were all destined to perish in a nuclear holocaust. The prevailing expectation was that the Cold War was soon to become a very hot and irradiated one. The question was never whether it would happen, just when?

This gloomy outlook extended well beyond the media who, it may be argued, have a financial incentive to forecast impending disasters. Bad news sells papers. Unfortunately though, the certainty of being obliterated in an instant because Leonid Brezhnev and Richard Nixon finally got fed-up with each other was also being promoted in the classrooms of our schools.

I can still remember Humanities lessons in which we were earnestly instructed on how to build nuclear fallout shelters in our backyards (no great hardship for 13 year old boys I might add). We were taught a shorthand vocabulary of atomic annihilation: MAD (Mutually Assured Destruction), ICBM (Intercontinental Ballistic Missile), RAD (Radiation Absorption Dose).

In Science, we learned the difference between fallout and yield. In English, we were fed a diet of novels about the doomsday scenario and dystopian movies depicting life in a nuclear winter. I still have a cartoon given to me by a teacher which shows a sleepy President Reagan waking up in the White House. His finger hovers uncertainly over two buttons above the bedside table – one labelled LUNCH, the other, LAUNCH.

Mushroom clouds over Auckland all seem a little bit silly now. However, the fact remains that my generation grew up with a fair degree of fatalism that the end of the world really was nigh. I look back now and wonder how that affected our subsequent outlook on life. Are we more cautious, less committing, perhaps even cynical and blind to some of the joys of life as a result of being raised in a climate of such pessimism?

My introspection might not really matter, were it not for the fact that mine was not the only generation to have been educated against a backdrop of global fear. Throughout my teaching career over the past four decades, successive generations of young people have grown up with a procession of fear-inducing global threats. We have taught them variously they were all going to die from either HIV/AIDS, SARs, Ebola, Mad Cow Disease, Zika, the Millennium Virus, ozone depletion, global financial crashes, terrorism, COVID-19, and now global warming and climate change.

I do not mean to be flippant; each of these crises undoubtedly held the potential for disaster. But my concern is the effect all this doom-saying has on impressionable young minds.

Expectation is a powerful force, and children learn to accept what the adults in their lives expect.

If we constantly portray the world as fragile, frightening and ultimately doomed, what impact does this have on their outlook and future state of mind?

Sticking Plaster or Plaster Cast?

Which is why, to a degree, I applaud the modern-day focus on the importance of mental health. At least it addresses the natural human tendency to catastrophise, hopefully putting all those endless existential threats into perspective. Although that does rely on us all meaning the same thing when we say, “mental health”. The term itself suggests a comparison with the concept of “physical health”. Both can be good or bad, strengthened or compromised. Both can be improved by the way we choose to live our lives. But often talk about mental health lacks the degrees of distinction that everyone understands when talking about physical health. From a very early age, we quickly learn the difference between a stubbed toe and a broken bone. Both are immediately painful, but one requires far less treatment and leaves no lasting damage.

Yet we often don’t seem to apply the same degree of nuance when discussing mental health issues. Feeling sad or blue gets muddled up with severe depression. Short-term worry or natural insecurity get confused with chronic anxiety disorders. The normal stresses of life in the modern world morph into an amateur diagnosis of PTSD. Ironically, it sometimes seems that the more sensitive we become to mental health issues, the less able we are to clearly identify and address them. People don’t often say “I’ve got bad physical health”, they are more likely to say “I’ve got a cold” or “I’ve got cancer”. Yet all too often we hear the catch-all comment that somebody has “poor mental health”. That type of sweeping generalisation can inhibit people from offering the appropriate level of support, or even to avoid the issue altogether, for fear of not really knowing how bad the condition is. To treat it, we first need to name it.

Like Cures Like

Once identified, mental health maladies can be treated with an appropriate level of intervention in the same way as physical illnesses are. Just as the best hospitals have the best doctors, St Leonard’s is blessed to have an outstanding team of counsellors, whose extensive training and experience allows for a clear diagnosis when a young person’s mental wellbeing is challenged. Serious illness calls for external specialists, moderate conditions need a monitored course of treatment, small knocks often just need some TLC.

But just as with our physical health, prevention is always better than cure. Most of us are careful about what we feed our body, but do we take as much care over what we feed our mind? We drag on the running shoes to exercise our limbs, but how often do we deliberately stretch our brains? Sometimes, just like our bodies, our minds can benefit from the theory that underpins homeopathic medicine, “Like cures like”. That is, just like the way that vaccines work, small doses of the things that challenge our system help build immunity for the times when we are confronted with bigger versions.

Our parenting and our teaching should include situations in which our young people are exposed to small, controlled experiences that will build resilience for all that life may later throw at them.

Dealing with disappointment after a missed selection, battling nerves ahead of an assessment, the fickle tides of teenage friendships, these are not symptoms of “poor mental health”, they are the cure.

A Centre in the Centre

Fostering an enduring sense of wellbeing in young people then, calls for three purposeful actions on our part:

1. Creating a climate of healthy optimism about the world,
2. Describing and discussing emotions calmly and openly,
3. Allowing a diet of experiences that build resilience and immunity.

All of which is the mission of the College’s newly opened Wellbeing Centre. Built, not by accident, at the very heart of the College, for its aims are at the core of all we do. Open to everyone, a space that is as much about positivity and optimism as it is about remedy and rehabilitation.

Our new Wellbeing Centre won’t necessarily protect our young people from nuclear fallout, acid rain, or the next pandemic virus. But it will instil resilience to cope when such fears arise, nurturing the mental fortitude and positive outlook to realise that most challenges can be overcome. Being well starts with the realisation that the world is full of far more good than bad, and that just like our bodies, our minds have been built to adapt to it.