

Domum Address July 2022

For the first and only time I am experiencing Domum as you are experiencing it: as a leaver. You are probably sharing my mixed emotions – perhaps taken aback by the reality of leaving (which for me after 18 years is not an insignificant matter), and at the same time energised and excited by what is to come. So you'll forgive me if I focus a bit on what we are going to be carrying forwards in our lives rather than what we are leaving behind us.

Mr Lewis kindly explained to me the other day that the word Domum doesn't just signify a location, home, but it also implies a movement *towards* home. And it's always struck me as Wykehamically perverse that our school song is about going home, not a celebration of school, just as we call working in the evenings toytime, and the longest term of the year Short Half (for perfectly good reasons, as it happens, and I'm sure that we have all benefitted from splitting Long Half in, well, half). Indeed, the song Domum is about a longing to be away from here and to be at home, accompanied by a certain impatience which you may well share right now listening to me.

But what is that home, and what exactly is the nature of that longing? Where are we headed in a few hours' time? Is home somewhere where you won't be judged by the Second Master, or, if you are me, where you won't be judged by the Headmaster, Bursar or Warden. Or is home that place where your sense of yourself, your identity, is most firmly rooted? We all have our own unique relationships with home – thank goodness for that - but what we generally share is a sense of personal history: home is where we come from, and, at this moment in time, where we are headed. But of course we are not just thinking about home at this moment in time. We are also thinking about the rest of our lives, and how we might spend them. What will university be like? Who will we meet? Where will we live? Who will we spend our adult lives with?

What impact will our lives have? What will be our legacy?

These last two questions are I think the most important ones. A few weeks ago Mr Sparkes spoke movingly here in morning Chapel of the Nguni Bantu virtue of *ubuntu* meaning "humanity" or "I am because we are" (or "I am because you are"), or, in some translations, "humanity towards others". Unless we discover some remote village in the Drakensberg Mountains where Winkies is played with even more impenetrable rules than we have here, there is no evidence to suggest that William of Wykeham ever visited southern Africa, but I like to think he would have approved of *ubuntu*. Outstanding as he was as an individual, Wykeham knew that the well lived life was, in the last resort, defined by the impact we have on others, and that, regardless of public recognition, that impact is unlikely to lie in the singularity of an historic act, but in the aggregation of deeds accumulated over a lifetime, an impact spread over many different people in many different contexts. Or, in the spirit of ubuntu, the good life might be defined as the cumulative act of living as part of humanity. We can't all be Nelson Mandela or Archbishop Desmond Tutu, and it is no coincidence that neither of these two remarkable men set out to define themselves by driving change. Their conscience, and their identification with others, compelled them to do so. Fame, a shallow concept in itself, doesn't begin to do justice to their achievement. And it is more often the case that it is the apparently small gestures which mean the most, because it's in those small acts where our humanity is most apparent, person to person.

Jane Austen's tomb in the cathedral interestingly makes no mention of her as a novelist but praises her personal qualities. And amidst all the glamour and hype of the Platinum Jubilee, two things stood out for me. One was something here: the simple fact of support staff, dons and pupils all sharing a meal together, something which the Headmaster pointed out would have been unthinkable at the jubilee of Queen Victoria. The other was our present Queen sharing a marmalade sandwich with Paddington. What could be simpler or more touching than that? I was going to say human, but that wouldn't be true of a CGI bear: but you get my point.

At this juncture of our lives, it is tempting to be impatient to make our mark. And none of what I have just said should in any way imply that individual achievement is unimportant. Quite the opposite. Make the most of the life you have ahead of you. But it is important to consider the nature of that achievement. The Midlands in the mid-19th century may seem a long way away from southern Africa or 21st century Winchester, but the novelist George Eliot articulated her own form of ubuntu in the closing pages of her novel *Middlemarch*. Here she is musing on the destiny of her flawed but idealistic heroine Dorothea Brooke:

“There is no creature whose inward being is so strong that it is not greatly determined by what lies outside it....Her full nature...spent itself in channels which had no great name on earth. But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

It's interesting to note in passing that even George Eliot can't quite resist the lure of historic acts: humanity's good is only “half owing” to unhistoric acts. And it is certainly true that our lives' achievements lie somewhere between the public and the private. But she stresses too “the growing good of the world” – virtue is organic, alive, not static, and it lives well beyond the individual grave. This apparently downbeat ending had one Victorian reader fling his copy away in despair with the words “and is that all?”. I don't share that despair. There is something clear-sighted and humane in this contemplation of the well-lived life which is profoundly life-affirming. Our future does not have to consist of heroic gestures or historic acts. If it does, all well and good. But as St Paul puts it well in the reading we heard earlier: “Let your moderation be known unto all men... whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report; if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.”

I like to think that Wykeham would have wanted his Wykehamists to leave this place equipped for something which transcends personal ambition. Speaking for myself, I leave here enormously indebted to all I have learned, and even more the people I have learnt from, including you. Notwithstanding my role as Second Master, the last 18 years have, believe it or not, strengthened my faith in human nature, not diminished it. And if I may I will presume to give you two pieces of advice.

The first is prompted by one of my favourite television series, *Ted Lasso*. If you've seen it, you may remember a darts match between Ted and the brash, wealthy ex-husband of his employer, Rupert Mannion. Spoiler alert. Ted wins the match after an unpromising start. But this isn't merely a tortoise and the hare story, where hard dogged effort wins over complacency. Ted makes the point that Rupert underestimated his opponent because he lacked curiosity. A curiosity about other people will never permit you to make assumptions about them. So don't abandon your curiosity about other people and about new experiences – don't be too busy, preoccupied by school life or simply too defensive so that you close down. You will miss out terribly if you do.

Defensiveness forms the focus of my second piece of advice. You have had here a unique opportunity here to be yourselves. This is a place which wants us all to be comfortable in our own skin. I hope very much that this has been your experience of the school. And that may – may – entail risk. A few may take advantage of your openness when you go out into a world which is less forgiving and in which people may be less open. But the gains of being unapologetically yourself far outweigh that risk. You can be sure of being valued for who you really are, rather than the person you think others want you to be. And last but not least, don't be afraid to acknowledge vulnerability to those you trust – and cultivate a reciprocal trust with that in mind.

Domum, home, then, is not really a fixed place at all. It is a movement towards becoming what we really are, and learning to trust that inner compass. And that identity is bound up not with the isolation of a misplaced ego or individuality, but in a shared human experience. Use your interactions with each other well: be receptive, and keep an open

mind. I wish you well, and thank you for the time we have spent together.

Nicholas Wilks, July 2022