**Assembling a skaftin of tools to build a life of distinction**

You are about to leave school with something rather dangerous: lots of information… and little experience. The good news is that life does not really care about how much you know. It cares about how you think, what you choose, what you do, and especially what you do when things do not go according to plan.

So, I am not going to give you advice about how to have a successful life. I am going to give you something more useful: a small operating system for building one. Your future is not one enormous decision; it is the accumulated consequence of thousands of very small ones.

**We all have two operating systems competing for the keyboard.**

The first is **ME**. How am I doing? What do they think of me? Am I winning? Am I getting what I deserve? Am I being recognised? This is ego. It is not evil, it is useful. It helps us survive and navigate the world but left in charge it is insatiable and exhausting.

Ego lives in scarcity, comparison, fear, status, anxiety and resentment. When life does not give us what we want, the ego's first-aid kit is self-pity. And here is the caution: It feels like medicine, but it is actually poison.

The other operating system is **WE**. Curiosity, contribution, connection, collaboration, service, generosity and learning. Here is the paradox: we are happiest when we stop making ourselves the centre of the universe.

So, here is a line worth adding to your skaftin:

**Do not think less of yourself. Just think of yourself less.**

Identity has become one of the most overtraded commodities of our time. Your race. Your gender. Your religion. Your politics. Your school. Your family. Your culture. Today the hyper-identity of pronouns, vanity plates, tattoos, etc. All of these may be parts of your story, but a part is not the whole.

The moment identity becomes a fortress rather than simply part of your story, we arrive at exclusion. The outcome of this exclusion is **us and them**. Once we have decided who they are, we become remarkably good at not listening to them.

So please cultivate this little habit: When you hear an opinion you dislike… **get curious before you get angry or judgemental.** You do not have to agree with it, but if you can no longer listen to an opposing view, you have become brittle. Brittle things break as they should, for they are unsustainable.

**Your choices have a long tail,** so it is useful to get practical about choices.

One of the great truths about life is that small choices have consequences far beyond the moment in which we make them.

Imagine the paths of two matriculants.

One starts varsity and discovers that everyone around them parties. They join in occasionally. Then regularly. They miss a lecture. Then another. Their marks slip. They avoid the lecturer and then their parents. They become embarrassed. They start avoiding the problem. And the second Savannah starts to numb the embarrassment.

None of those individual choices are particularly dramatic, but six months later, they are living in a very different landscape from the one in which they started.

That is the thing to understand: **You do not just choose what you do. You choose what your choices make possible next.**

That is the one matriculant story – you write the other one.

What is in your skaftin makes for better choices, better outcomes and better paths. So, choose carefully. Choose your thoughts. Choose your habits. Choose the arrow you pay attention to. Choose your company. Choose your mentors.

Be diligent about the company you keep, because your tribe are not simply people you spend time with. **They are part of the architecture of the person you become.**

When you are choosing people, here is a sharp tool: **Observe what they do and discount what they say** - for we are what we repeatedly do.

Someone can tell you they are entrepreneurial, disciplined, generous, financially responsible and emotionally mature - wonderful, but audit the evidence:  Do they turn up? Do they keep promises? Do they shift blame? Do they virtue signal? Here are two gems:

- How do they treat people who can do absolutely nothing for them?

- And especially, how do they behave when things go wrong?

Audit whether their actions and their words live under the same roof.

Hitch your star to those that are reliable. And cultivate it assiduously in yourself – **for reliability is a virtue that compounds over time.**

Vigorously cultivate **critical thinking** too – **for it has a direct impact on the quality of your choices** and you will avoid mistaking social cues for substance.

The world is going to sell you success barkers: The car. The clothes. The device. The house. The followers. The job title. The hyped Insta-life.

Do not get seduced into decorating the packaging, where the ego enslaves you. Invest in the product – it is the substance where the seat of your soul sits.

**You are the product. Invest accordingly.**

**Question the map** …that is another choice you have to make; whether you are going to accept the world as it is presented to you.

Every generation inherits something called dominant logic. The assumptions about how things are supposed to work. Some of those assumptions are useful. Some of them are rubbish.

For years, the dominant logic has been: Get a good education. Get a good job. Work hard. Retire. Fine, but the world you are entering is changing at an eye-watering pace. Technology is changing industries. AI is changing work. Entire jobs will disappear. New ones will emerge for which we do not yet have names. So, do not define your future only by asking: What job can I get? Ask instead: **What problem can I solve? What value can I create? Who needs what I can do?**

The dominant logic says be a job seeker, but why not be a **job creator**? Which makes more sense for where we are now. Remember: Being an entrepreneur does not necessarily mean starting a company. It means looking at a problem and thinking: What I can do to solve for that?

If your operating system is **WE rather than ME**, then you will be a natural server, solver and solutioneer. Welcome to a world that needs you.

**Then life happens…**

Now for the inconvenient bit. Even if you make excellent choices, **life can fire some painful arrows. This is not a design flaw. It is part of the curriculum.**

You will fail, be rejected, be disappointed and people will let you down.

You will sometimes make a spectacularly bad decision. Possibly more than once. These are all direction arrows; these **first arrows are data – use them**.

But beware the second arrow that follows; that is the story we tell ourselves about what the first one meant and often it is the low road where we take things personally or take the poison of self-pity. The second arrow does the real damage, and the irony is that we are the ones that fire it.

Here is where one of the most useful ideas I know comes in; **being Anti-fragile.** Resilience means you get knocked down and get back up. Anti-fragile goes one step further: You get knocked down and learn something in the process, and that makes you stronger because you have used the first arrow data.

The poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, captures it beautifully, "Difficulty is one of the greatest friends of the soul. Our lives would be immeasurably enriched if we bring the same hospitality to meet the negative, as we do to the joyful and pleasurable."

**So, you do not merely survive the difficult thing. You use it.**

Conflict can teach you. Failure can teach you. Rejection can teach you. Discomfort can teach you. The question is not whether difficulty and pain will arrive… the question is: **Will you arrive empty-handed when it leaves?**

**So, my fervent wish for your life is, that it contains just enough difficulty to be useful.**

When you build your skaftin of tools, these five questions make for the rigour of a sound operating system, and fine outcomes that will yield a life of distinction:

**1. Am I in ME or WE mode?**

Here is an easy tip: if you take things personally, you are in ME mode; if you are in conflict a lot, you are in ME mode; if you are part of an "us and them" (even passively), you are in ME mode.

**2. What Happens Next?**

What are the downstream consequences of this choice? Tip: think fully beyond the short term (refer to the tale of the two matrics)

**3. Signal or noise?**

What does the evidence actually tell me? Tip: observe what people do and discount what they say.

**4. What if I am wrong?**

Have I fully listened to another perspective or am I brittle? Tip: being wrong is a minor matter, unless you continue to do it. Here is a fresh perspective on being wrong. When you are, then technically you are a scientist because science is about making errors and eliminating them.

**5. What can this teach me?**

What can I take from this difficulty? If you are opting for self-pity and victimhood, you not only lose the lesson of the first arrow, but you are paying the price twice. So, the problem is not the problem, our reaction is the problem.

If you can cultivate the habit of asking yourself these five questions, you have a remarkably good operating system for a life of distinction.

Here is a final tool for that skaftin to build your own weather; a 30 second recipe for sunshine.

Sit in silence for just 30 seconds with your eyes closed and a smile on your face.

That is sunshine right there, for your smile triggered the release of endorphins, dopamine and serotonin which delivered this:

- neuropeptides that reduce inflammation and boost immunity; and

- these are the feel-good hormones that elevate your mood.

So, do yourself and the world a favour - smile often and be **"oh joyful light".**

You cannot control the weather. You cannot control the economy, technology, other people, your family, history, or every arrow that life fires.

You can build your capacity to navigate. You can choose your crew. You can learn to read the signals. You can question the map. You can change direction and when the storm comes, as it will, you can learn to sail better because of it.

So do not spend your life trying to construct a perfectly safe harbour. Build instead, the capacity to sail.

Be curious. Choose carefully. Think critically. Serve something bigger than yourself and when life gives you difficulty… do not waste it. Use it.

That, I think, is what being **future-fit** really means.

A closing thought from a stoic philosopher Epictetus, (especially for the adults who have a lot less runway left than you), poses this profound and sobering question:

**How much longer am I going to wait to demand the best of myself. Be a joyful light to yourself and to others.**

Thank you.

**Mrs Shauneen Procter, Guest Speaker**