

Founders' Day Speech
St Mary's Calne, 2nd July 2022

I'm thrilled to be here with you today because it is a joy to celebrate a cohort of bright, well-rounded young women embarking on a new phase in their lives. Exactly three weeks ago today I stood in Westminster Central Hall, cheering, applauding, and shamelessly shedding as many tears as the London sky during summertime, at my older daughter's graduation. There was so much I wanted to say, but eighteen years had flown by, and a new phase of her life was about to begin on a different continent. While she wondered what would fit into her miniscule New York dorm, I wondered how many pieces of advice I could fit into the coming days.

Rather than sitting her down for a talk or casually inserting snippets of wisdom into daily conversation, I wrote a letter to my eighteen-year-old daughter containing seven wishes and seven suggestions for ways of thinking of the future from a very proud mum—and it is excerpts from this that I would like to share with you today.

Before I begin, I know that we are here to celebrate the leavers, but we also need to celebrate the army of people who have supported, challenged, cheered, and even at times, annoyed you, without whom you would most definitely not be where you are today. Some of them are in this marquee, others may not be able to join us. Please take the time to thank them, to acknowledge what they have done for you, and to show them the gratitude their actions deserve. And always remember: love is not just a noun; in its most precious form, it is a verb.

My first wish for you is from Roald Dahl's *Matilda*, a story about a girl who wants to read all the time: "You don't have to be sorry for leaving and growing up."

My first suggestion also comes from *Matilda*: "Just because you find that life's not fair it doesn't mean that you just have to grin and bear it." Life isn't fair, but YOU need to be, for your wellbeing.

My second suggestion comes from that sentiment: should you choose to make a difference in this world, to make it a fairer one, let it be a small difference.

The Dalai Lama once said, “the planet does not need more ‘successful people.’ The planet desperately needs more peacemakers, healers, restorers, storytellers, and lovers of all kinds.” For me, these are the successful people. Be wary of this world’s obsession with success, find your own measure of it. I will tell you mine: the true successes in my life have been the ones that nobody has witnessed nor spoken of; they are the ones that I have held privately with myself.

If we are going to speak of success, then we must speak of failure—life has taught me they are not opposites, but lovers locked in an eternal embrace. I urge you to fail with all your gusto because failure builds character far more than success does. And in the words of my favourite pessimist, Samuel Beckett: “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” That is what I have done with my bookstores, in my human relationships, and in being a parent, and I continue to fail better.

Celebrate your failures more than your successes. To help you do that, I suggest you find, or put together, a tribe of lion-hearted women that will cheer you on, and that ideally you can go clubbing with.

This brings me to my second wish for you: friendship

My mother always says, “show me your friends and I will tell you who you are.” Be deliberate in your friendships. Curate the people you surround yourselves with. I’m sure you’ve made remarkable friendships with peers, teachers, and the many people whose paths have crossed yours. Some will be friends of virtue, some of pleasure, and others of utility. You need all three. I consciously try to surround myself with people that are better than me, people that I look up to, that possess a quality I admire—even if it’s their bar tab.

And I have learnt that they don’t all need to be superheroes.

On the day of my daughter’s graduation, other than my family, I was flanked by two friends, both of whom had gotten on a plane from two different continents to share this moment and to fulfil a word: to be godmothers to my daughter, and friends to me. One is a human rights lawyer, a graduate of Bryn Mawr College, the recipient of the Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights Award, a diehard feminist, and a tireless warrior for the voiceless and the oppressed. The other doesn’t have a university degree because she dropped out to marry the love of her

life. Two successful divorces and three outstanding children later, she is one of the most compassionate and just people I know. Her presence in my life resets my moral compass. The sum total of your life, of your successes, isn't in the pieces of paper you collect—the degrees, the awards, the recognition—but in the lives you touch and that touch you.

This brings me to my third suggestion: just as you develop interesting relationships with people, strive to do so with books and places. In my youth, I enjoyed thinking about the books I had read. In my middle age, I am more excited by the books I haven't read, the experiences that await me. So just as I have a library of books I have consumed and revisited over the years, I also have one of the books that I can't wait to meet, and maybe we click, maybe we don't—the anticipation is thrill enough.

While friends and books make marvellous companions, you need to find places that will keep you company as well. And if you can't find any, create your own. As a bookseller, I will always point you in the direction of a bookstore. In your new life, wherever you find yourself, don't forget to pop into your local bookstore, talk to the bookseller, receive a book recommendation, offer one of your own. In an increasingly divisive age, bookstores are perhaps one of the most accepting spaces where we garner a sense of community. They are commercial spaces where we don't have to practice commerce, they are secular places of worship. While they attract people of different ages, races, genders, classes, and backgrounds, these people all have one thing in common: they want to know things about things and about themselves. They are curious. Join them!

This takes me to my third wish for you—what Thomas Hobbes called “the lust of the mind”—curiosity. May you always approach this world with a curious and open mind. Try and suspend your judgment for as long as you can, and once made, be open to changing it.

My fourth suggestion is that you keep a revolving bucket list. Because our attention spans fall prey to the speed and intensity of life, it is helpful to keep some goals or things we hope to experience in mind—regardless of whether they are small or seismic. For example, in the coming months I hope to see the Yayoi Kusama exhibit at the Tate and Jez Butterworth's play, *Jerusalem*. In the coming year, I hope to visit Japan or go on a family trip to Machu Picchu. Previously on this list: lose ten pounds, write a book, get it published. Sadly, a recurring entry since 2015 is “learn to ride a bicycle.” This list doesn't haunt me, nor is it the cause of

frustration or castigation, it is a joyful reminder of what may have mattered at some point and what continues to matter.

My fourth wish for you is one that needs no explanation, only reminding: be kind. Be kind. Be kind. To yourself and to others. And when in doubt, choose kindness.

My fifth suggestion is that you go out of your way to do something that does not benefit you. I know that during your years at St Mary's Calne you have volunteered in numerous activities and given back to your communities in numerous ways. Don't stop doing it wherever you are. Whatever activity you choose to engage in, do it without thinking of how it would look on a CV, just allow its impact to gently wash over you. Two years ago, my daughter organized a community meal at a centre in South Kilburn. The important element wasn't the feeding of struggling strangers, but the bringing together of people who may not have a life overloaded with family and friends and who need companionship and community to salvage their mental health. A year ago, they were short-staffed. My daughter asked me to help. Since then, I have shown up every Friday at 5:30pm to plate the delicious food prepared by Prince, the chef from Lewisham who is manic about presentation. At 6:30 pm I put on my bright yellow marigolds and start cleaning plates and cutlery. At 7:30 pm I scour the industrial-sized pots and pans. At 8:30 pm I mop the greasy kitchen floor. These three hours are the most rewarding of my week. I work alongside strangers who only know me as Zein's mum, the lady who loves to end the week taking it all out on those dirty pots and pans!

Kind acts are essential to our spiritual wellbeing. Donations and charitable giving are necessary, but so is the giving of ourselves. You need not look far to see where this has worked well: two of the founders of St Mary's Calne, Ellinor Gabriel and Penelope Murray, were not only generous benefactors, but also in the words of their co-founder John Duncan lavished, "thought, care, anxiety, watchfulness, and love" on their community. So please give of yourself and expect nothing in return.

My fifth wish for you is that you be difficult. Let me explain. I don't mean obnoxious, unpleasant, or a diva. To my mind, 'difficult' means complicated. We are a kaleidoscope of qualities and emotions unfolding in a kaleidoscope of situations. People are complicated, as is progress. Changing the world is always difficult. So be difficult. Be ambitious. Get it done. I've been called a difficult woman many times, but most of the time it is when I am asking for

something that is right and just. I happily remain difficult. And I hope to change my world one book at a time.

My sixth suggestion to you is that you be competitive—with the only person in the room that matters: YOURSELF. Eight years ago, my daughter came home from football try-outs—a spritely ten-year-old with a lethal left kick—to proudly proclaim that she had made the team, actually everyone had because coach Richardson told them that in this world they are all winners. I was about to challenge that statement. I hesitated, not wanting to diminish my daughter's victory. Then I decided that as her mother, I owed her a resizing of expectations. I told her that in this world we are most decidedly not all winners, but in her mother's eyes she always would be. In this world, we win when we try our hardest, when we are resilient, and when we have a very healthy dose of good luck because sometimes hard work and resilience are not enough. Strive to be a better version of you, better than you were yesterday.

My sixth wish for you is the wish of lilies. At St Mary's Calne you have been surrounded by the symbol of the Lily with its connotations of rebirth and purity. I come from the land of the lotus—which also carries connotations of reincarnation and innocence. Take inspiration from them: be pure of heart, and don't hesitate in reinventing yourself. Find the courage and the freedom to keep producing innovative versions of you.

My seventh and final suggestion is that whatever you do—even the most mundane of tasks—do with love and passion.

My seventh and final wish for you is that of gratitude. Be grateful to everyone and everything that comes into your life and leaves your life. Know that it was meant to. You are not owed anything, so please be grateful for what you receive.

Thank you for listening to one woman's wishes and hopes. Amid all the doing, don't forget to allow yourself to be, to become. And remember what Roald Dahl knew too well, "If you are going to get anywhere in life you have to read a lot of books."

I leave you with a thought to the future: 2023 will mark the 150th anniversary of St. Mary's Calne and one year away for you. Take stock of where you came from and where you hope to

go. Be proud, be humble, be serious, be silly. Don't be scared to show this world who you are and what you are made of; and give it as good as it gives you, if not better.

Good luck and God bless.

Nadia Wassef.