



Dear Parents and New Boys of 2017

I love the African bush, wherever it may be but the Kruger Park holds a special attraction, perhaps because I started going there as a small boy and I found that losing myself in the search for some elusive animal was deeply calming, wonderfully frustrating, intimately magical and ultimately food for the soul. Seeing something for the first time is a gift – an armadillo, a pangolin, a martial eagle swooping down on a small Oribi or perhaps seeing a tiny pearl-spotted owl. Running a school is a little like the African bush: you see uniqueness at every turn and nothing surprises you. You see young buck rutting for dominance in the herd or an old weathered, scarred lion grunting at a younger cheeky pretender or a honey badger taking on a larger predator – they are tough and resilient. St Alban's boys are beautiful in every way, polite, interesting, extraordinary, wonderful people and sharing this space with them is fascinating, invigorating, magical and ultimately incredibly rewarding food for the soul.

As you are aware, we are experiencing a severe drought throughout the country. I was acutely reminded of this last July when we took our annual trip to the Kruger National Park. There is very little grazing and very little water. These circumstances make for ideal game viewing wild dog, leopard and lion on a kill, but early one morning we had our most interesting sighting ever when a distressed hippo calf charged the car and slumped down exhausted, dehydrated and quite certainly starving (more about that later). Recently this part of the world experienced flash floods and in many parts of the country rain rejuvenated the land and with it brought new life and hope. These events remind me of how circumstances can change quickly and how we all need to be focused and present to ensure we are ready to face the reality of an uncertain and precarious world. This morning we have some new blood entering the system at St Alban's and this is a good thing – it is like rain on parched land: it reinvigorates us and it gives us hope for a brighter future and ultimately it makes us stronger and more resilient.

This new blood is you, Form 1's, and it is a privilege to be able to welcome you formally to St Alban's College today. In many ways, we start a journey of discovery together. You start your College career and I start my journey as Headmaster of this great establishment. It is a new season and new beginnings bring with them new challenges, anxieties and exciting times. You will be walking in the footsteps of those who have gone before you and only five years ago we were gathering for the same reason with our current Matric Class. I have recently joined them on their leadership camp at the end of 2016 and I have no doubt that they are excited about welcoming you into our family and ensuring that you grow and thrive, like they have in their time here. Each of you New Boys and your families have been eagerly anticipating this day. You have dreams and aspirations for what you want to achieve and at the end of last year you came to the end of, what has hopefully been, an amazing journey for you in your prep school career. The road lies out before you and hopefully you are feeling a mixture of excitement and anxiety which is completely normal. In a sense, we all feel vulnerable – vulnerability lies at the centre of all our family stories – it defines our moments of greatest joy and fear, disappointment, love and belonging. Whether we are guiding our children, standing beside them, supporting them or talking through their locked door, vulnerability is what shapes who we are and who our children are.

Brene Brown, in her book, *Daring Greatly* says: "If we push vulnerability away, we turn parenting into a competition that's about knowing, proving, executing and measuring rather than just 'being'. If we put aside the question of 'who's better?' and put down the yard sticks of grades, sport, trophies and achievements, I think the vast majority of us would agree that what we want for our children is what we want for ourselves – we want to raise children who live and love with their whole hearts."

Brown mentions eight guideposts in our quest to raise children. She says, we should strive to raise children who:

1. **Engage with the world from a place of worthiness:** You are starting your career at St Alban's College today and you immediately become one of us. Yes, there are some rites of passage which you will learn and grow from, but St Alban's will embrace you and you should embrace it wholeheartedly. Just being here today and wearing that blazer means you are worthy and we believe there is a unique journey ahead of you.
2. **Children should embrace their vulnerabilities and imperfections:** As indicated I recently spent some time with the Form 4's on their leadership camp – one of the activities they engaged in was completing a high ropes course. This is a series of activities 13 meters up in the air which tests your fears and works on ensuring that you build trust within your team to feel confident enough to walk across a wire with only your team supporting you in a harness. These young men certainly embraced their vulnerability and it was warming to see them support those who, at first thought this would be an impossible task. The power of a positive word from a friend and the encouragement to endure and break through your fears is significant and it is my prayer that all our Form 1's will find the strength to embrace their vulnerabilities in time, with the help of their friends, teachers and parents.
3. **We should raise children who feel a deep sense of love and compassion:** "We live in an unequal country and inequality is a ticking time bomb", says Nobel Peace laureate, Muhammad Yunus. Our children will need to understand and be bold enough to solve some of these issues. Kuben Pillay, our past Chairman of Council, said this in his last Prize-giving Speech: "We have to work to lower the racial and socio-economic divide and build closer understanding of what it is to be poor in this country. We address the poverty-versus-privilege barrier or we risk social breakdown." We will only solve this if we explore the South African reality beyond the school grounds. This will enable all of us to be more compassionate and empathetic to the reality of our country and your sons will certainly be engaging with the reality that is South Africa as he journeys with us.
4. **We should encourage the value of hard work, perseverance and respect:** This is sometimes a difficult one in a society which lives off instant gratification. We, as a school, and you, as parents, are going to have to work together to ensure that we encourage our young men to understand that nothing good comes without perseverance and hard work. My generation, as children, were given the choice between the talented but erratic hare and the plodding or steady tortoise. The lesson was supposed to be that slow and steady wins the race. But really, did any of us want to be the tortoise? No, we wanted to be the less foolish hare. We wanted to be swift as the wind and more strategic. The story of the hare and the tortoise gave *effort* a bad name. It reinforced the image that effort is for plodders and suggested that in rare instances, when talented people drop the ball, the plodder could sneak through. It said *effort* is for those without ability. People with the growth mindset believe something very different. For them geniuses also have to work hard. They admire effort, no matter what your ability is. EFFORT IS WHAT IGNITES ABILITY AND TURNS IT INTO ACCOMPLISHMENT and young men, this is what you will need to do this year – ignite your ability and work hard.
5. **We should strive to raise children who carry a sense of authenticity and belonging with them:** Belonging is the innate human desire to be part of something larger than ourselves. Fitting in is not the same as belonging. Belonging is being accepted for being 'you'. Fitting in is being accepted for being like everyone else. It is our prayer that your sons will belong – in my opinion this is strength at St Alban's – once you join our family we accept you for who you are! But it doesn't stop there – if we want to cultivate a sense of worthiness we need to partner with you as parents and I would encourage you to remain involved in supporting your boys on the sport fields and in the classroom context. Moms, this means you have to allow them to try and solve some of the complex problems they will face in the years ahead – try not to interfere too much as this will rob them of belonging.
6. **Have the courage to be imperfect, vulnerable and creative:** As parents, we are often tempted to intervene in our children's lives, particularly when things go wrong. We are always rescuing and protecting and in a sense this is as a result of our own vulnerability – we can't stand the uncertainty, risk and emotional exposure even when we know the right thing to do is let our children figure it out for themselves. By working together, collaborating and being honest with one another **and by insisting that your sons take responsibility for their actions, we will build trust and support them on their journey to adulthood.** Struggle is good because hope is a function of struggle. If we want our children to

develop high levels of hopefulness we have to let them struggle and this sometimes goes against our instincts. Brene Brown says, "If we are always following our children into the arena, hushing the critics and assuring their victory, they'll never learn that they have the ability to dare greatly on their own."

7. **We should strive to raise children who don't fear feeling ashamed and unlovable if they are different or struggling with something:** The world seeks to make us conform but, New Boys, you have an opportunity with this new beginning to redefine the young man you want to become and my advice to you is to be authentic to who you are, embrace the real you and don't compare yourself to others.
8. **Move through our rapidly changing world with courage and a resilient spirit:** Life is not about winning or losing; it's about having the courage and resilience to put yourself out there. Life will throw things at us – a little like the hippo storming my car in the Kruger – life will bump and shove us around emotionally and physically when we least expect it and ultimately we will need to have the courage to face up to unexpected events and the resilience to persevere through our troubles.

Class of 2021...

Albanians who are successful are those who are engaged, those who immerse themselves in the river of life at the school, those who dare to be vulnerable and try things they have never tried before. Success is the sum of our incremental effort, resilience and ability to allow ourselves to be vulnerable, to step out of our comfort zones and to engage with the world at large. Success is seeing every experience as an opportunity to learn and understanding the value of hard work.

Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit. Habits begin and manifest deep in the mind and they can be friends or foes. Whether they are a positive force in our lives or obstacles to the goals we want to achieve, habits become ingrained through repeated actions."

Parents...

We all have dreams and aspirations for our children. At St Alban's we understand those dreams because your sons become part of our family.

WB Yeats said this in a poem written to his would-be lover, Maud Gonne:

*Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,
I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

Thank you for entrusting us to care for your sons on this journey. We understand that as you sit together as a family today, you have specific dreams, particularly for your young man who joins St Alban's today. He is your special, unique treasure and your dreams and his dreams about the future are real and precious. We understand that, and as Yeats says, "you have spread your dreams under our feet" and I assure you we will tread softly as we seek to partner with you as your son becomes more independent on the journey to adulthood. There will be happy times and sad times, achievements and disappointments, but one thing is certain – every young man who engages in the rich tapestry which is St Alban's College will be changed forever and I look forward to joining you, and I once again invite you to pop in here at any time – this is as much your school now as it is your sons. I look forward to getting to know you and exploring the years ahead together.

Shane Kidwell