

Sunday Island of July 29, 2007

Thomians young and Thomians old

A Prize Day speech made on July 06, 2007 by Desamanya Bradman Weerakoon.

Being invited to be chief guest at the annual prize giving of one's old school must be one of the high points of any person's life. I am very conscious of the privilege that the warden has accorded to me to today. I want to thank you Sir for the singular honour you have done me.

My profound regret this evening is that Mrs. Weerakoon who was also invited to share in the distribution of prizes (and greatly enjoyed these occasions connected with my old school), sadly and unexpectedly passed away some days ago. I know she would have wanted me to be here this evening in spite of what has happened. I know she is here with us in spirit.

Prize Days undoubtedly evoke in all of us nostalgic memories. Mine, unlike perhaps others who have graced this rostrum, are not associated with the proud experience of walking up to receive several prizes for scholastic merit. I recall getting, if at all, few of these, and only a few for what are interestingly termed, extra-curricular activities. As far as my scholastic achievement goes-that came mostly after school. I must have been what is sometimes described as a "late performer". So, there is some hope for those who did not win in the competition for prizes whom we honour today. Tomorrow, may be your day.

I remember two distinct wishes I had as a 10 years old, a lowly Lower Third student sitting in the front row of this very hall in 1940. My first wish was that the chief guest's speech would be short and that he would not go on forever; and the second, that he would request the warden to declare the day following Prize Day a school holiday! I think it was some kind of Thomian tradition at that time. Of course this has been wisely, already ensured by the warden deciding to have Prize Day this time

on a Friday. The other wish about the chief guest not being overly long-winded, I intend to observe. I shall try very hard to make my speech within the time provided. I read, and listened to with great interest the warden's report. It is impressive in both the diverse range of activities which occupy the life of present day Thomians (18 sporting type activities and 49 clubs and societies) and the many laudable achievements of the school during the year, both in academic endeavour - 20% of those who sat the 'O' levels obtaining more than seven 'A's and almost 2/3rds of the A level candidates passing all three subjects and on the sports field.

Foremost among them - for me and many old boys must be the convincing win over Royal in this years Big Match and my warm congratulations to all who made it possible. (I was privileged to watch part of it in the company of the warden who himself made such an outstanding contribution to the STC score with his debut century in 1967)

As I pondered on what I should talk about my mind flashed back to a series of events and encounters in virtually the most important first ten years of my life at STC, in the middle years of the last century.

Allow me to recall some of those sights, many of those in this audience would have similarly seen; the voices we then heard, the curiosities aroused by our wonderful teachers, the books we read and the "imagination" we permitted ourselves to have, of thoughts beyond the immediate present.

I believe all of us here, to a greater or lesser extent, are where we STAND, in regard to the important national issues that challenge us today - questions of peace and war, violence, governance, human rights, development and so on, on the basis of our own individual experiences in what is normally referred to as the formative years of our life, in school.

So permit me to recall briefly three "*flash backs*" - connected with that period of major turbulence in the long history of STC - in the 1940's and early fifties. I would

say that they have, in a very forceful and compelling way conditioned my subsequent thought and behaviour in public life.

- Firstly – and almost of seminal importance the Winchester House boarding years – accompanied with tears at leaving the comfort of a home and adjusting to a life governed by bells and ‘prep’ and time tables, and living cheek by jowl with a bewildering cohort of boys of different sizes, ways and backgrounds. It was traumatic, but of foundational importance in teaching me how to live with diversity, appreciating the differences and getting on with others. This was not to last very long for in 1942 the war came to Ceylon and to us with a loud bang; a Japanese fighter plane crashes on the ‘big club’, our hero the captain of cricket (Dugald Abeysekera) volunteers for the Royal Air Force and eventually dies for his country, STC is taken over for a military hospital and the great school breaks into three parts and scatters around the country.
- Then, the second flash-back; five unforgettable years at Gurutalawa – the growing years – where friendship were forged which have lasted forever, fielding became a fine art on a sharply sloping, uneven field of *patana*, and geography took on a special lustre with teaching mainly out of doors.
- Dr. Hayman and Fr. Foster and a few other fine men and women took us through those years, not only exhorting, encouraging and disciplining but by their example of commitment, devotion to duty and caring becoming role models for continuous emulation.
- Hunger, I remember, was a constant preoccupation in those food-rationed days but I don’t recall anyone dying of malnutrition and strong bodies-and possibly broad minds-were nurtured in that pure mountain air. One of the special things about Gurutalawa was that it connected us with village life, in exceptional ways, and forced all of us take an interest in simple but practical things like animal husbandry and farming; but as always some of us took it to an extreme-becoming expert more in the culinary handling of poultry and others in warlike, lightning raids on those luscious mandarin orchards that then existed on the farm.

Truly, as the poet said – *“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, But to be young was very heaven”*

And then, the **third** flash back – the ‘long way home’ when the war ended. Back to Mount Lavinia, adjusting again to a recovered world, the College Form years, and finally the triumph of playing-along with several friends in the audience today – in the Big Match itself, in the year that the country achieved its independence. But not before we had been cut and polished by that prince of cricket coaches – Bertie Wijesinha – who taught us to play to win, BUT only by excelling in the competition and playing by the rules.

We were inspired in those stirring days (with political independence around the corner) by the vision sadly not yet realized-of a nation where in the words of an eloquent Thomian Prime Minister, ALL – regardless of race, class or political ideology would enjoy

- Freedom from want
- Freedom from ignorance
- Freedom from ill health and
- Freedom from fear I think we in school at the time shared the dream that Martin Luther King dreamed later in the United States, that all our children would live in a nation where they would not be judged by the race they belonged to or the creed they believed in but by the content of their character.

There is a line in our College song which I feel has a special significance for Thomians in today’s uncertain and challenging world. It endows Thomians with a special role and function. That particular line-towards the end of our song – behoves us to “LOUDLY LET THE ECHOES RING FOR ALL WE HAVE AND ARE”. In other words it is asking us to be loud and clear in proclaiming what we stand for, on the grounds of what Thomians HAVE and ARE. In a world often characterized by compromise, prevarication,

hypocrisy, and what our former teachers would have said-“humbug”. It is asking Thomians to be fearless and vocal in the defence of what are their cherished values.

If I may say so with respect it is a quality that you, Lord Bishop display so often on public issues with such distinction.

What are those cherished Thomian values I just referred to? I believe they are universal, and anchored in a priceless spiritual and moral tradition we have. It is these values which have shaped and formed the Thomian spirit over the past 150 years and influenced through the leadership that Thomians have given the country, in so many fields, - politics, medicine, law, education, administration and so on - the basic texture of our polity and society. Foremost among those values I would rate;

- **Inclusiveness** - covering all, rather than exclusively some; which makes it possible for example-a non Christian to be Head Prefect of this school and a Tamil to captain the cricket team.
- **Pluralism** - which encourages, and indeed celebrates diversity and differing identities and opinions.
- **Equality** - which rejects any notion of superiority based on class, race, caste or political party and hopefully (and this is one which my respected friend Siva Obeysekera would especially like) - since we are essentially yet a boy's school - even gender.
- And lastly **Transparency** - openness in all one does; the bed rock of good governance of which STC's administrative apparatus - the Board of Governors especially, has been such a consistent and model performer.

Based on these values let me move towards concluding this Prize Day speech by attempting to delineate some of the qualities that in my view make the Thomian identity - in short what the ideal Thomian today would look like.

It is a composite image capturing the essence of the lives of some great Thomians of the past I have known well – some of them our teachers – but could well be improved with additions from this distinguished audience. So I offer it to you in the nature of work in progress.

I was able to identify seven distinct competencies but, I repeat, I am sure you in the audience will be able to add some more.

- First, the famous Thomian GRIT – a small word that often figures in our lexicon, conjuring up images of extraordinary will-power and resistance, especially when the chips are down. Example of this is legion in our history, especially on the sports field.
- Second, MODESTY in demeanour – that accepts triumph and disaster as just two imposters. In simple parlance – no extolling of one’s attainments; no boasting; indeed one’s peers in school would soon see to that; its part of the college culture.
- Third, a passion for equality – revolting against the inequity of an unequal world. In short providing space and a place for everybody.
- Fourth, a sense of DUTY – putting service before self; I found this especially a strong quality exemplified by our staff members then, and perhaps now.
- The fifth place I would give to VERSATILITY – the quality that the winner of the Victoria Gold Medal – one of the school’s most treasured awards – must embody. In short it is for the **all-rounder**; the boy who shines both in the class room and on the sports field. Some former winners brilliantly exemplify this. Take for example, Dudley Senanayake – athlete, Cricketer, by repute, prodigious in his propensity to consume food, head prefect, the Science Tripos at Corpus Christi, Cambridge and four times Prime Minister of Sri Lanka; and in my own time S J Thambiah – who combined academic achievements of a high order, was a prefect who captained the College cricket team and went on to become Professor of Anthropology at the most prestigious University in the United States – Harvard.

- Sixth, would be PLAYING BY THE RULES. This would imply not taking shortcuts, no favouritism, not hitting below the belt or when your opponent is on the ground, and at all times being prepared to accept defeat with good grace and all that the word 'sportsmanship' evokes.
- And finally seventh, and I thought about this one quite a lot and could not reject it for it is so much a part of the Thomian make up - THE GIFT OF FUN. Without this final very human ingredient I don't think the Thomian recipe would be complete. The ability to see the lighter side, to enjoy one's work, and to be able to even laugh at yourself; this has always been a part of the Thomian story.

As I said I offer these to you particular to the young ones yet in school as food for thought. It is a working draft and open for addition and improvement for I thought a definition or redefinition of who or what is a Thomian is very relevant at this challenging time.

One final quotation which I believe is appropriate - not only for today but for everyday on the kind of men this school could and should produce.

It is an extract of the poem GOD GIVE US MEN by the American novelist and poet, Josiah Gilbert Holland and it goes like this:-

*GOD GIVES US MEN the time demands;
 Strong minds, great hearts, true faith, willing hands.
 Men whom the lust of office does not kill,
 Men whom the spoils of office cannot buy,
 Men who possess convictions and a will;
 Men who have honor; men who will not lie.*

'I have not the slightest doubt that S Thomas College will continue to bring forth men of this calibre and that, in particular those who have won the race today and will soon come on to the stage to be recognized by us all as winners, will be foremost among that noble company.