

Dr Christopher Young's Speech delivered on Speech Day, 29 June 2007

Mr Chairman, Headmaster, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Some days are special. And for me, the last Friday in June will always be a special day. Before you think I am now going to say something misty-eyed and appallingly nostalgic about Campbell College Speech Day, let me very quickly disabuse you. When I think of Campbell College Speech Day, very little springs to mind: clean shoes (for a change), a very long wait for a prize (invariably a book), and – worst of all – interminable and incredibly dull speeches. In fact, much as I have tried in the last few weeks, I cannot remember a single fact about a single speech made here on the last Friday in June. Given that my memory can download large swathes of my time here at Campbell like a documentary video on U-tube, this can only mean one thing: not only were Speech Day speeches dull, but no-one was remotely interested in them. With apologies, Headmaster, I suspect this hasn't changed much.

No, the last Friday of June is special to me because of where I was on the last Friday of June 2006. At exactly this time, a year ago to the day, I was climbing up the steps to the Olympic stadium in Berlin with my best friend Markus, World Cup quarter-final tickets in our sweaty palms, in heady anticipation of watching Germany play Argentina. The match was remarkable, but more remarkable still was the genuinely euphoric celebration of nationhood displayed by 75,000 German supporters. For someone who for over two decades has watched the Germans struggle to emerge from the long shadow of their justifiably troubled historical legacy, it was a privilege to be present on such occasion. It doesn't get much better than this, I thought as I stood in that electric atmosphere. Well, it just has. Mr Chairman, Headmaster, your invitation to me to give this speech was an honour of some considerable magnitude, and I was deeply moved to receive it. It was with the greatest pleasure that Angela and I accepted it, and I will now have two unique and special occasions to think back on fondly when the last Friday of June comes round each year.

I have to say, though – despite your warm words of welcome – that I am still somewhat puzzled as to why I am actually standing here, in a suit and tie and clean shoes, rather than my normal T-shirt, shorts, and trainers in the upper floor of the university library. Quite apart from the fact that some great luminary obviously cancelled at late notice, Oxbridge dons, as far as I can tell, have not traditionally been held in the greatest esteem at Campbell.

In the year that I left school – 1986 – an article appeared in the Campbellian magazine, written by my former Head of House, Trevor Thompson, looking back on his three years at Oxford University. Knowing I was going to Cambridge the following year, I read it with great interest. This is some of what Trevor wrote:

“At Oxford, there is the opportunity to interact with Britain’s finest minds. You are expected to assimilate factual material fast and to draw your own conclusions from it. To guide you in this task you are provided with a tutor who is a Fellow of your college – normally referred to as a Don. [This all sounded good, but then he goes on.] For such an ostensibly enlightened bunch, Dons lead a narrow and cloistered life. Though few are gifted teachers, they are super intelligent beings, foremost in their particular fields of study. Any stories you may have heard about them are probably true. A Don at my college has been known to get lost on the way from the common room to his study.”

Obviously, Trevor was talking about Britain’s second best university, Oxford. At Cambridge, I can assure you, everyone knows what day of the week it is and exactly where they are. Headmaster, as I said, it is a great privilege to be back here at Methody.

Mr Piggot’s invitation came with a warning: “they’re a difficult audience”. Oh, thanks. Do you want me to speak to the parents or boys? ‘Eh, both really. Good luck.’ So, following my brief to the letter, I have some things I would like to address to the boys, and some things I think their parents should hear. Please feel free to switch off at the appropriate moment – I will quite understand.

Boys first. In time-honoured fashion, the speech-day speaker should dispense polished words of wisdom from the great height of their status, reputation and experience. When I told my daughter this, the look of disdain and scepticism on her face – one of those looks that only an eleven-year old can wear with such ease and honesty – immediately told me that this was not the route to go down today. It is not a path that I tread naturally anyway. Instead, I thought, I might as well make myself useful and give you advice about one of the few things I do know a great deal about: how to get into Cambridge. As prize-winners, after all, you are already on the right track – so let me help you a bit further down it. I’m often asked this question – normally by slightly nervous headteachers and heads of sixth form – ‘how do we get them into Cambridge?’. Thankfully, the answer is very simple. In fact, there is only one thing you need to know to get into Cambridge. It’s so simple, in fact, that people don’t believe me when I tell them.

Let me tell you first what it is not. It is not about doing something spectacular at interview. For example – and I've encountered all of these things first-hand during interviews: it is not advisable to wear a very short skirt and suspender belt (if any Campbellian is thinking of trying this tactic, please leave it to the boys from Inst); it is equally foolish to spend half your interview doing a magic display – even if it is very impressive and I am still wondering how the candidate managed to get the ace of spades under my foot without leaving his seat 2.5 meters away from me; it is also not terribly wise to say that your favourite book is Harry Potter – even if you are only saying it for effect and you did take the trouble to read it in French. On a more serious note, let me give you another tip. You do not get into Cambridge through hard work. That might surprise you. Let me explain: it's not that hard work doesn't help. It certainly does. In the middle room up, just up to the left of me here in the central hall, I heard nearly on a daily basis in our maths class: 'Albert Einstein said that genius was 10 per cent inspiration and 90 percent perspiration. Well, with you boys, it is 1 per cent inspiration and 99 percent perspiration. Get on with exercise 23, and finish it off for homework'. Hard work helps, and is necessary, but what I mean to say is that it is not the one thing that you need to know to get into Cambridge, or any good university, even Oxford. That one thing is this: a genuine interest in your subject.

Is that it? Yes. You would be amazed at the number of people who fill out application forms, get their teachers to write flattering references, buy a plane ticket, get themselves into the interview room at a Cambridge college and show not the least bit of interest in the subject they claim to want to study for three years. You really would be amazed.

A real interest in a subject is the premise from which all else will flow. Hard work follows from interest. In fact, where there is genuine interest, no work is hard enough to exhaust it. My passion is German. Germany, its language, its culture, its people are all-enveloping aspects of my everyday life. More importantly, they are an integral part of my personality, of what makes me the person I am today. I can pin the beginnings of this all-consuming passion down to a within a few weeks. It started here in the first week in September 1981, in one of the temporary classrooms out on what was then the parade ground – our first ever German class in the Lower Fourth with the inimitable Ted Cooke. Sometime within the next two or three weeks, it had happened. Like when water turns to ice or steam. Just as in the physical world, within our own mental and emotional worlds, reactions can occur and we are in a completely different state. And from that very early point on, I don't think I could have imagined a day passing when I didn't want to do something German. I suspect, objectively speaking, I have worked very hard along the way.

But that is not the point. It won't be the point either for other Old Campbellians: Nigel Cooper, now Professor of Physics at Cambridge; or more recently, Billy McKee's son, Alan, now cutting through the maths course at my college like a knife through butter. Ask any of us, I suspect, and we would be hard pushed to tell you what work is. Whether it's Maths, Physics, or German – for us, it's not work – it's just what we do, it's what makes us tick. I suspect that could be treated as a real measure of personal success and fulfilment: how much of your working day is taken up with activity that you would not really describe as work? At any rate, from where you are sitting today, rather than from where I am standing, locating and cultivating your special interest will be the key to your future success.

Parents. How do you encourage and foster this sort of interest? Well, like the prize-winners, you are already on the right track. You have sent your sons to a good school. But can I encourage you to let things take their own course? The first thing you see when you click onto the school's beautifully designed new website is the phrase: 'Campbell College – an investment with a lifetime's dividend'. It's a catchy, resonant phrase with emotional weight – congratulations to whoever thought it up. But remember, there is a difference between investors and entrepreneurs. Investors put up the money, and the entrepreneur is the one supposed to have the sleepless nights turning it into profit. It's very unwise for investors out for long-term gain to look at their projected dividends on a daily basis – as some of you might know, this can be a depressing business. Investors should choose wisely, and then leave well alone. In this metaphor, the headmaster and the teachers of Campbell College are the educational entrepreneurs who are going to do the very best with your investment. Let them get on with it.

My mother and father worked hard to send me to Campbell, very hard in fact. I suspect when they were putting their hard earned salaries and savings into my education, they had little idea that their dividend would one day turn out to be one of a small group of people on the planet to know more than it is rationally sensible or healthy to know about medieval German literature. But I'm very grateful to them not only for caring a great deal about my education but for letting it develop in the most natural but gloriously unpredictable way.

So: to Campbellians, I would say: find your interest and pursue it as obsessively and recklessly as you can; to their parents: go with the flow. In concluding, there is one more thing I would like to say. In the 1980s, it was very easy for my parents to have faith in my teachers. And no wonder. I had wonderful teachers here at Campbell.

I had Ted Cooke and John Knox for German and French; Jack Ferris for Maths; Michael McGuffin in the choir; John McKinney on the athletics track; Chris Gailey at the Head of Allison's House. It is my very good fortune to have been taught by these men – I still sense their influence in many ways – and it is a privilege to call them my friends. Most of these names will be unknown to the majority of you. Under its new headship, Campbell is undergoing a phase of rapid change. By comparison, the idyllic world of Campbell College that Jay Piggot and I knew in the 1970s and 1980s must seem like the lost world of Atlantis. But change is not necessarily a bad thing. Since I left school, three things that no-one ever dreamt possible have actually happened: the Berlin Wall came down, Ian Paisley and Gerry Adams sat down at the same table, and Ballyhackamore got a restaurant with a Michelin star (another great Campbellian triumph). In a time of change for education in Northern Ireland, I believe Campbell College is ideally placed to thrive. I said earlier that Campbell is a good school – but I think it has the potential to be a great school. You prize-winners, to whom I offer my congratulations, as well as your parents and vast cohort of new teachers have a major role to play in making Campbell College into what we all know it should be: the best school in Northern Ireland. Nothing would give me greater pleasure.