

Address by
Mrs. Ruwanthie de Chickera
at the
English Day
held on 28th September 2013
at the Keble Memorial Hall,
S. Thomas' College, Bandarawela

Venerable Nesakumar, Staff of S. Thomas' College, Bandarawela, visitors and students

Thank you very much for inviting me to be part of this special day. I have been to your school from the time I was a child - this place has many memories for me. So I am very happy to be back- very happy to be here with you.

There is only one thing that I am sad about and that is that I am responsible for the most boring part of the programme - the speech by the chief guest. I apologise for that. Like you, I have sat in the audience counting the seconds until the chief guest stops talking and sits down. I know that you are already waiting to watch your friends perform on stage. So I promise you that I will not talk to you for very long. But I would like you to try and listen to what little I have to say. I think it's a little important.

My dear students, today is an important day because it is a day which is dedicated to things which are struggling to survive in today's world. Today is dedicated to things like books, and plays and speeches. And books and plays and speeches are struggling to survive today because today's world is a world of screens. A digital world.

Ipads, smart phones, game boys, internet, TV... this is more your world that it is my world - not only because you are younger than me but also because you are boys. Yes, as young boys, you are the ones who are most vulnerable to the world of screens. And the world of screens can be dangerous. And harmful. And you need to be aware of this in order that you can choose to avoid these dangers and take from the world of screen technology, only what you need. The biggest danger of the world of screens is that it kills the potential for imagination.

I am sure all of you here - even the smallest have watched a film. And I think that other than the smallest, all of you have read books. If I come to you with a book in one hand and a film of this same book in the other hand, what will you choose?

Why read a book when you can watch the film? Why watch the film if you can play the video game? Right? These are questions that young people face. And these are important questions.

I have something to tell you- and if you remember nothing else, remember this. Choose the book. Any day choose the book. I will tell you why.

There is a huge difference between watching a film and reading a book. A huge difference no matter how good the film is. The difference takes place in our brain. When you watch a film or play a video game, you just receive what is on the screen, your brain is not working hard to understand this experience, to imagine it for itself, which is what it does when it reads a line on a page. What are lines on a page? What are they? Only black marks. But when you look at these black marks, what do you see? Do you see the black marks or do you see a world created by your imagination? This is the power of reading.

Let me explain this in this manner - take a line in book - the line is "I never in my life saw a mountain such as this one". As soon as you read these words on the page, your mind begins to work, creating images of different mountains in your head and changing this image actively as you continue to read and process the words on the page.

In a film with this same line "I never in my life saw a mountain such as this one" you will get an image, the image of the mountain is given to you. And you will never think beyond this. Everything has been thought out for you. And you just accept it. You are not imagining. Your brain is not thinking.

The easy thing today is to turn to screens. Because we find everything there. Really everything does exist on screens. Everything except the space for imagination.

So what's the big deal? Why is human imagination so important? Imagination, my dear boys is the very foundation the very future of human existence. It always has been.

Everything we are today, everything we wear, eat, say and almost everything we see, smell and touch these were all imagined for the first time by a human mind, some time back in history. People throughout time have looked at what is before them, and have imagined it to be different. To be better, faster, bigger, more colourful. They have exercised their imagination. This is what has brought us here today. But today, we live in a world which is killing imagination. Because everything is brought to us as a full experience. The toys that you buy in toy shops come with the the accessories that they need - and more. There is nothing left to imagine. You already have more than you need.

Let me explain this through another example - I place before you three toys. I hate guns but let's take the example of guns for this exercise - the first gun is just three sticks. The second gun is a plastic toy gun which you can hold in your hand but which does not fire. The third gun is a digital gun which has five different kinds of bullets to choose from and from which you can see and hear the shots and can also see the different way in which the victims on your screen die. What will you choose? What is the best toy? The best toy, my dear boys, is the three stocks. Because this is what will make you think the most. This is what will challenge you the most. This is what will stimulate your imagination the most. It is the only one which will give you a chance to experiment with and create a gun which no one else in the world has even thought of before.

It is in things that are incomplete that there is room to imagine and grow. Do not forget this. And choose this for yourselves.

So the next time someone offers you a film or a book, remember me and pick the book. The next time you go out to play look for something which will stretch your imagination - don't reach for the Game Boy. Exercise your imagination. Your imagination holds the future of this world. I hope you get to use it to its full potential.