

Clues for Leadership

An Assembly address this week when the College appointed a number of student leaders

Dr Edmond Locard was a pioneer in forensic science (that is, scientific criminology) about a century ago. He was known as 'the Sherlock Holmes of France'. He formulated the basic principle of forensic science:

“Every contact leaves a trace.”

It was called 'the Locard Exchange Principle'. It says simply, for example, that any person passing through a room will unknowingly deposit something, leave something behind there, and take something away. A hair, a fingerprint, a fleck of discarded skin, some clothing fibre, a micro drop of blood. Something. Unknowingly. Picked up, or left behind.

Beyond the world of the criminal classes, of sophisticated detective work, I think Locard's principle has a broader application. We could call it 'the Principle of Influence'. Every person passing through this life will unknowingly leave behind something and take something away. Most of this 'something' cannot be seen, heard or numbered. And most of it is unawares.

I think we know this through those with whom we have a close relationship. We are all moulded and remoulded by them. And though that connection may pass, we remain nonetheless, a product of it. And we do the same to them. No love and no friendship can ever cross the path of our destiny without leaving some mark upon it forever, without taking something away.

But 'the Principle of Influence' is broader than that even. When you engage in a class, show enthusiasm, contribute, and work to your best, you shape the climate of the class. You set a tone. You raise the bar. And of course, the opposite is also true. Passivity, cynicism and disengagement are equally catching, though undesirable characteristics. When you captain a team, as the boys acknowledged today do, your words inspire others, you draw parts into a whole. Your actions too, even more than your words, shape the spirit of the enterprise. Senior boys, like captains, prefects and proctors, invariably (and often unknowingly) have the eyes of the younger ones on them. They may not say, or even realise, that they are looking for role models. But they are watching. Observing. Picking up some aspect of you, be it ever so fine or so incidental. Taking to themselves something of your character and making it their own. For good or for ill.

Teachers shape their students. Students shape their teachers. Mutual learning. The same with parents. They are the primary educators, but they learn from their children. A parent brings up a second or third child very differently from the first because they have been influenced by them. Whether you know it or not, and whether you like it or not, the school itself influences and forms you. And when you move through its corridors and classrooms, its ovals and chapels, its labs and library, you make it a different place to the Riverview of yesterday or yesteryear. You leave your mark.

St Paul thought of that nearly two millennia ago when he wrote in a letter to the Christians in Rome:

“The life and death of each one of us has its influence on others.”

That’s a lot more to think about than Locard’s ‘Exchange Principle’. Locard was only interested in catching a crook, important as that was. But *you*. You become a different person in what you pick up along the way. And in what you leave behind. You leave a fingerprint. A sign that you were here, yes. But more than that. Much more than the artists who crafted the glass in the Chapel windows. Much more than Br Forster who built the quaint bandstand you row past on the shore of the river. Much more even than the Boarders who laboured to make Fourth Field some forty years ago. You, rather, give a shaping to the school *community*. Much more intangible. But much more influential.

Today we have appointed a number of Captains. Of course we expect leaders will leave their mark. They will leave their stamp in the memories of members of the team, of the club, of the group, or of the squad. There will be legacies and influences later recalled.

“He knew how to inspire us.” “He was really talented but humble.” “He took time to know me, to teach me something.” “I can’t ever remember him being critical or sarcastic.” “He never asked anything of us he wouldn’t do himself.” “He was really generous and always shared opportunities.”

Remember that Locard’s principal spoke of leaving things behind *unknowingly*. To me that would suggest a leadership that was natural and uncontrived. Not deliberately seeking attention. Not aloof. If Locard followed a trail of memory clues like that of today, if he gathered such evidence of reminiscences here, he might conclude he had identified an influential leader. An *unself-seeking* leader.

But I hope even more than that. I would like to think he had made an identikit picture of *any* boy in the team. A sketch of any and every ‘View boy.