

CHIEF GUEST'S ADDRESS AT THE RICHMOND COLLEGE

PRIZE GIVING

BY AUSTIN FERNANDO

SEPTEMBER 30TH 2011

AT C. W. W. KANNANGARA AUDITORIUM

Venerable Maha Sangha, Reverend Sirs, Principal, members of staff, officials of the Department of Education, distinguished invitees, proud parents, old boys, sons of Richmond.

Principal Sir, Thank you very much for the kind words you spoke in introducing me. After listening to such introduction, I am a bit nervous; because I have to justify by my address that I deserved such and you spoke the truth!

Sir, may I say at the outset that I am honored to be here on your invitation. It is not only because of being the Chief Guest at this prize giving; but because it is held in the world's best college - Richmond.

Going down the memory lane I am reminded that I had been on stage twice on a prize giving day at Richmond.

First was when I won the HSC Geography prize as a student. Of course, no one will consider winning only one prize in eight years is proof of excellence in my education!

Secondly, it was when I as an old boy attended a Prize Giving at Richmond with His Excellency DB Wijetunga as the Chief Guest, and also proposed a vote of thanks on an impromptu invite. I would have been given that opportunity, as I was somewhat instrumental in inviting President Wijetunga.

Today is the third occasion, as the Chief Guest, most probably because of my public service life, as the Principal mentioned.

May be I am a late developer in life to be a Government Agent, Head of Departments and Secretary to several Ministries, UN Consultant, academic paper presenter in famed universities like Stanford and George Washington in the USA and Kings College of the UK, being JICA's Senior Advisor and the author of the English book "My Belly is White".

I joined Richmond to Grade 5 from Hikkaduwa Sinhala Primary School. Passing a competitive admission test was all needed for a "godaya" to join the best College in the city.

To speak of my education later, I had only three Credits at the SSC Examination. I remember my good friend and classmate I. Wijewantha obtained four Credits, but could not proceed to HSC with me because Arithmetic was his problem. Nevertheless, both of us succeeded in our own inherent lives, irrespective of SSC Examination results- him in politics and I in administration, proving that examination results can fail in predicting the future of students. The final outcome was his becoming 'Hon I Wijewantha' and my simply becoming 'Mr. Austin Fernando'!

I was luckier in the HSC and University Entrance Examinations. I was selected from the three subjects pass category since there were a few vacancies after admitting four subjects pass category! Nowadays, to enter the University there is such a scramble, Z- Scores and what not- I am sure parents and you boys may be envying my luck!

Then a lesser number of teachers and students were at Richmond. We never attended tuition classes. Many teachers conducted "Afternoon Classes" free of charge. Teachers often interacted with parents. So much so, one of our great teachers – Mr. HDA Gunasekara occasionally ridiculed a mischievous brat saying- "Even your father was this when he was in College. How can I straighten a dog's tail?" which refrained the student from being mischievous attracting repeated disrepute to his father!

We had a Sinhalese majority and Moors also in fair numbers at Richmond; but Tamils the least. I think there were more Burghers than Tamils. However, we did not have Sinhalese or Tamil medium separate classes, as in some Colombo schools now. This integration helped us identify our friends as brothers. Hence, equity and equality reigned at Richmond.

I remember when I was in the fifth grade, Marsuk Saheed who later became an institution at Richmond, once complained to Mr. PDOC Wickremesinghe that classmate Wekunagoda had called him in a racially sensitive manner. Mr. Wickremesinghe queried whether Wekunagoda did so. He was mum. The teacher gave a heavy knock to Wekunagoda and ordered Saheed "Shout at him calling him - Sinhalya!" Saheed smiled and did not obey Mr. Wickremesinghe. Both Saheed and Wekunagoda headed towards the Tuck Shop during the interval, arms over each others' shoulders. Such experiences taught us not to discriminate on race or religion. Thus humanitarian and egalitarian feelings towards each other developed in us from childhood. We respected all alike, and were reason that even today I cannot discriminate anyone on narrow parameters of race, ethnicity, religion, caste etc.

It developed to such heights as I grew older, when the mobs invaded the flat where I lived at Kirillapona during 1983 riots, I had the courage to shelter a young Tamil lady who was brought to my house to save her life. I and my wife definitely jeopardized our lives that day, but it was the right thing to do. Thank you Richmond, for developing courage to act according to conscience and do the right thing, even in the face of death.

Discipline was of paramount importance at Richmond. Nevertheless, I vividly remember two disciplinary events in my student life, which I share because they influenced my life in later years.

One was when I behaved very mischievously on a teacher. The Principal, the great Mr. ER de Silva questioned me of the incident and I owned it up. Richmond had by then developed my character to own up wrong even at the age of 15. Irrespectively, Mr. ER de Silva decided to “sack” me from Richmond. My father met him and pleaded to retain me at Richmond on two grounds, though I have erred. The first was, I was to sit the SSC examination and would miss it if I were sacked. Second was that “sacking” from Richmond meant I would be in the waste paper basket of education.

The Principal had told my father that he would review the punishment in consultation with my teachers. Later I was told by another teacher – Mr. K. Tudor Silva- that when the intended punishment was discussed with the teachers the first representation to retain me in school came from the teacher to whom I had been mischievous. It was said that he did so because he felt that I had a good future. I sometimes ponder whether teacher's predictions come truer than SSC results. While it is a good lesson to teachers who sometimes punish students inhumanly, as the media occasionally reports, of course not at Richmond, and also for the students not to displease teachers and respect them and be disciplined. I extended respecting teachers to elders and superiors, and it was one influence among many to discipline my life.

Second related to the eighth standard third term test that changed my life's direction. I had a classmate –one Kalupahana- with whom I shared my Mathematics answer script on his request. My intention was to help a classmate and his intention was to prove his ability in Mathematics, without possessing such ability! Unfortunately he was caught returning the script to me. Mr. BAD Gunasinghe who was the invigilator took the two answer scripts and wrote 00% “Copied,” signed and reported the incident to the Vice Principal, who “generously” and “vigorously” caned us. To receive four cuts from Vice Principal Mr. Shelton Weerasinghe was extremely painful, considering my puny size and his bulky structure, and the height from where the cane dropped on my flat buttocks at high speed. The third punishment was that I was not permitted to do Science. My appeal to the Principal Mr. ER de Silva received a negative response. His eyes contacted the zero marks in the third term and not the 75- 80% marks I had obtained for Mathematics in the previous term tests. This perturbed my parents who thought that I –the only son in the family- should be a doctor or an engineer, as the fad was. If it happened today one may sometimes file a human rights case in courts that three punishments have been imparted for one offence!

There is also a lighter side to this incident. Later, after 23 years, in 1978, Mr. George Mendis, Director General of Education visited me with Mr. Gunasinghe when I was the GA Polonnaruwa. Unknowing my previous interactions with Mr. Gunasinghe Mr. Mendis began to introduce me to the former. Before he could proceed from “Dharme,

he is Austin Fernando... " I told Mr. Gunasinghe "Thanks to you Sir, I am here coordinating and directing many engineers and doctors," which baffled him. That was what I lost! But when I explained him the past incident it rekindled interesting memories of destiny. When we were GAs, unlike these days, it meant "Government Agent" and also the "God Almighty" due to the aura of office – with the same abbreviation- GA as researcher Braibranthi wrote. This episode gave me the opportunity of becoming a God Almighty!

I remember taking part in the Under 19 - 880 yards event at the House Athletics Meet for Sneath House and finishing seventh or eighth. Knowing that I would not be even the third I took part. Then I believed and now I believe that participation is important than winning. One of us who ran in this event, but did not win –Vernon Udugampola- will be the only Sri Lankan tipped to be an Olympic torch bearer runner at the London Olympics. Harry Potter author JK Rowling speaking on 'Benefits of Failure' said in 2008 that "Failure is the stripping away of inessentials." Vernon did not 'strip away' running as an inessential and was paid dividends!

Participation is not limited to sports. Sometimes we faced very unpleasant challenges. In them sometimes we succeed and sometimes fail. While in public service personal participation in such events was unavoidable. I can quote some unpleasant incidents from among many.

First was facing the cyclone in Polonnaruwa District on 23rd of November 1978. We faced many challenges, constraints, shortcomings and imperfections. If every thing was perfect there was no need to manage. We could not have reversed the district to normalcy if we had not known participatory approaches, well coordinated for relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction.

In those efforts – whatever action was- we had to be patient; tolerant. I am reminded of the famous Japanese business tycoon Mr. Matsushita who said that "Storms may pass, patience is virtue." I had a print out of this saying kept under my glass pads in office and at home. In office, patience was to deal with official problems, their creators, extraneous influences etc. You may surprisingly ask me "Why at home?". Just as a hint of explanation, I may say "The reason is on this stage today." Hence, patience is a lesson from me to Richmondites and even to their fathers!

The second was during 1983 Riots when I was Commissioner of Cooperatives for Sri Lanka. The Food Commissioner Mr. N. Pulendiran's house was torched by the rioters. Minister Gamani Jayasuriya left the food supply for the whole country in the hands of Messers Dharmasiri Peiris, Graham Dissanayaka and me. We carried out this exercise day and night, divided our functions among departments, attached responsibilities to cooperatives, security units and created supervisory mechanisms etc and through participatory coordination prevented food riots, especially in Colombo. These positive outputs originated from lessons learnt at Richmond from participation in activities of organizations such as the Wednesday Club, sports groups, scouting, various societies etc.

Third was when I was Secretary Rehabilitation and when the Pettah Bus Stand bomb occurred. I had, along with me Dr Salgado of the National Hospital Mortuary, to identify 121 blasted bodies. The government appointed temporary Magistrates to accelerate disposal of bodies. We had to work with Police to ensure there was no break down of law and order. We handled the issue without any problem with patience, public relations and proper coordination.

The fourth was the killing of 32 Buddhist priests at Aranthalawa by the LTTE on June 2nd 1987. I was ordered by President JR Jayewardene to immediately proceed to Ampara and ensure that no Tamil family in Ampara area was touched. I had to act in coordination and with understanding of the emotionally charged priests, public, businessmen, opportunists, military and police, thugs who would have been waiting for an opportunity to burst their pent-up venom. Once again personal participation and consensus building with an egalitarian approach, in which we have been influenced by the bringing up at Richmond helped in the management of the Aranthalawa incident.

Later as Secretary of Defense, especially when engaged in negotiations with the LTTE, I generated doubts of peace making with them, but we patiently aimed to win over. As in the 880 yards race, regrettably I could not win. The importance was that every effort had to be made for victory, within the rules of the game. What is this failing when I compare with the failure to produce a son to study at Richmond? Of course, no one blamed me for not winning the 880 yards race and my wife never blamed me for not fathering a son! Two of us always admired a son of Richmond as a son-in-law- Danesh the son of Mr. S Kariyawasam, former Principal of Richmond, who is here today.

Regarding failures I am reminded of a speech made by President Barack Obama to children. He related successes of author JK Rowling and Basketball player Michael Jordan after their initial failures and said "These people succeeded because they understand that you can't let your failures define you – you have to let them teach you. You have to let them show you what to do differently next time. If you get in trouble, that doesn't mean you're a troublemaker, it means you need to try harder to behave. If you get a bad grade, that doesn't mean you're stupid, it just means you need to spend more time studying." Sons of Richmond, this is what you have to follow for success.

Developing inner strength to face problems has been another quality that was inculcated in us at Richmond. I remember before the Port was nationalized by the SWRD Bandaranaike government, my father who was a clerk in the Admiralty used to give me about 20 – 25 cents as pocket money for a day. That was a very great amount then. When he was retrenched only with one month's salary, due to nationalization of the Colombo Port, he could afford to give me 10 cents on alternate days for about two months. Thereafter even that stopped. Our family was impoverished. I remember when I did not get a single cent as pocket money, I quenched my thirst during interval

from a tap. I dared not look at the Tuck Shop! I faced hardships, but did not lose the objective of life- "Be a Man to serve the country, independently, forthrightly, according to your conscience and honorably". Let this be a lesson to any one deprived at Richmond.

As GA Polonnaruwa when I faced the cyclone in November 1978 I saw many who were in worse predicament than me at Richmond, having lost their shelter, kith and kin, breadwinners, all accumulated wealth and cultivation. One laments for a shoe until he sees another without a foot! Having understood even for a short while- until the father was reengaged by the Customs Department- what poverty, hardships, weak family economy etc were, I was determined to be more dedicated and committed to the gravely affected. These paved me the way up in service sooner than expected. And, I was appointed Secretary of the Ministry of Rehabilitation in 1986 working in LTTE terrorized North and East at the age of 44 years, resolving humanitarian problems. Cyclone problems were a patch on these humanitarian problems. "Polonnaruwa was devastated by the cyclone, but made a senior out of Austin Fernando" was my favorite quote those days! My advice to you all is "Always be dedicated and committed to your studies, job, family, society and to the country." As President Barack Obama once said "Whatever you resolve to do, I want you to commit to it." Today I repeat it.

It is not for fun our villagers say "Gahe katu ul karanna onada?"(Is it necessary to sharpen the thorns in the tree?) It is because we inherit lot of our inherent qualities from parents. As the British Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg recently after riots in the UK pointed out, we expect more than affordable functions from teachers. Hence, guiding students has its limits. Therefore, parental roles become very crucial. I wish to mention one personal experience.

I remember my father had a colleague who worked in the Customs. He was rich. But he used to lose his senses annually for about a month. Then, he got in to wild fits and broke everything from cups, saucers, plates, radios to almirahs he had at home. Once I saw this gentleman's devastating behavior. I told my father about what I saw. While sympathizing, he quipped, "Easy money fritters away easily!" When I inquired he told me that his colleague made money in wrong ways at the Customs.

Inquisitively, I asked him why he did not make such money. He replied "If I indulge in such and one day gets caught, even you will be called a bribe taker's child. I do not want you to hear such a comment or to lose all opportunities in life due to my sins. I am very happy with the money I get monthly by signing on a stamp!" This statement reverberated in my mind always. I am very much poorer than many in public service, but I do not regret at all. Every night I sleep well, undisturbed. Pride of being honest is more valuable to me and my family. Mine is a case of poverty not becoming a cause for withdrawal, but a motivator to be straight forward! And I pray you Richmondites and their parents will bear highest integrity and guide their children on the same path. I know it is a somewhat difficult task in this competitive society where money is the yardstick of success, honor, facilities, recognition etc. But you can do it and you must!

I can speak for hours on these until you get bored. But, I will now switch to address you of lessons that could be learnt from a great man from India. He is His Excellency Abdul Kalam, former President of India, who was honored with Bharath Ratna award- the highest in India. We can learn from his life a great deal; and, I shall quote a few qualities of Abdul Kalam that could be eternally valued as insights.

In his biography he reminds us of an incident in his young days when he was differently treated by the wife of one of his great admirers. He was a believer of Islam and the admirer and wife were devout Hindus. Once he was invited for lunch by his admirer Mr. Sivasubramniyar Aiyar and Mrs. Aiyar refused to serve meals to Kalam on Hindu ritualistic grounds. But Aiyar being a rebel sat with Abdul Kalam, served and had his meal together. Later Kalam was invited for dinner by Aiyar. When Aiyar found Kalam's hesitancy, Aiyar told him "Once you decide to change the system, such problems have to be confronted" and true to his words when he arrived for dinner, Mrs. Aiyar was totally different and served him with respect, with her own hands. This can be the situation faced by another deprived person. My recipe is to face it as Aiyar and Kalam did. You will not fail; and, contrastingly who can say whether you would not become the Head of State, as Abdul Kalam did?

In Kalam's biography I find him espousing the thinking of one of his great teachers- one Iyadurai Solomon. Solomon used to say that "To succeed in life and achieve results, you must understand and master three mighty forces- desire, belief and expectation." Solomon had believed "With faith, you can change your destiny." This is something which we do not think of seriously. Being a Buddhist, I apply this thinking to Buddhist faith and values by applying it to what Gauthama Buddha preached- "Sunaatha, Dhaaretha, Charaatha dhamme." By reading, writing, listening we can achieve Sunaatha. We should desire to hear and learn. By bearing in mind, embedding deeply what was learnt and experienced, we can achieve – Dhaaretha. If we do not believe, we will not bear in mind what we learnt. By practicing with focus on what was learnt and borne in mind, we can achieve Charaatha. The projection of what was learnt will direct us to succeed in our expectations. This is how I interpret what Abdul Kalam learnt from his teacher Solomon on success. How many of the parents and students- even the Buddhists- think in these terms of living in Dhamma to succeed?

Abdul Kalam did his Science degree – B.Sc. in Physics – the first desire- and found that it was not his subject and opted for engineering. Engineering was his new expectation and he joined the Madras Institute of Technology. He says "There were setbacks, disappointments and distractions, but my father's inspiring words anchored me in these periods of nebulous drift. Learning without wisdom is of no use". How many of us students and parents have expectations of this nature now? How many of us face set backs, disappointments and distractions properly?

Kalam tells us his interest to be a flying officer in the Air Force, for which he faced an interview with 25 others. He was ninth and only eight were recruited. He was frustrated. When so frustrated another may commit suicide;

some go astray, go mad; some withdraw. They lose sight of the universal truth that some failure in life is inevitable. When it happened to Abdul Kalam he went to a Hindu priest- Swami Sivananda. He advised Kalam "Accept your destiny and go ahead with your life. You are not destined to become a pilot. Forget this failure, as it was essential to lead to your destined path. Search, instead, for the true purpose of your existence. Become one with yourself, my son!" This advice continuously remained in his efforts to develop space related programmes. Kalam desired to be more than what he was at a given time. This is how he reached the destined path in science and technology. How many of our parents and students, their friends look at life in this futuristic manner?

I wish to summarily tell our parents one touchy experience from Abdul Kalam's life. It is said when he had to leave Rameshwaram to Ramanathapuram for studies his father had told his mother who was upset, quoting Khalil Gibran the great poet "Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of Life's longing for itself. They come through you, but not from you. You may give them your love but not your thought. For they have their own thoughts." We deal with children with so much of our determinations, we overlook that children have their thoughts. Finally some satisfy our wishes and some do not. My dear parents, please touch your heart. Have we done the correct action to our children by trying to force our thoughts on them?

Lastly, I quote a *shloka* I was taught by my Pali teacher at Richmond- Mr. MDS Sumanasekara. Once he walked in to my Home Affairs Ministry Office in 1994 where I was the Secretary. He handed over a piece of paper on which this *shloka* was written. He explained this *shloka* to me too. I remember reading out this *shloka* in my speech at the Birth Centenary function of Mr. ER de Silva in 2001. Mrs. Chitrani de Silva, daughter of Mr. ER de Silva present here may remember it. It was:

Amanthram aksharam nasthi = There isn't a letter unusable for a 'mantra'

Nasthi moola manaushadham= There isn't a root that cannot make medicines

Ayogyo purisho nasthi = There are no inappropriate men

Yojakakh tathra durlabhakh = Rare are persons to duly engage them.

Every child in Richmond is like a letter, a root and qualified. The challenge faced is to duly engage you. May Richmond College find the means and leaders for due engagement. May parents and teachers motivate their children to be men required for Sri Lanka and the rest of the world. Best wishes from me and my wife to the sons of Richmond, Principal, Staff, Department of Education, RCOBA and other Old Boys' groups supporting Richmond and parents to achieve excellence .

I remember Harry Potter author JK Rowling said at Harvard that she could not remember a word said by the lady speaker when she graduated. Likewise, also I cannot remember who were the Chief Guest and what he said when I was awarded the HSC Geography Prize 52 years back. Therefore, I think you would give my speech the

same forgetful attention! Nevertheless, my kind request and wish is that Richmond College will remember this *shloka* and overcome the rarest challenge.

Thank you for the inviting me, receiving me and my wife and for the patient hearing given to me. I will remember this day for ever as the happiest day in my life.