

## Pauline Connelly

Special Guest Speech

### Speech Day 30 October 2014

*Rector, Fr Rob Davoren, Members of Council, Invited Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, Staff and Students*

I grew up in Port Pirie, South Australia, and was educated by the Good Samaritan Sisters.

I always like to mention these good sisters, as these women were an important part of my life and became part of my formation and story. Like you one day, will look back and say I had a Jesuit education. And that will mean something to you.

Being a teenager in the 1970s was a fascinating experience.

The music was great, the fashions were even better, the wine was cheap, the political scene was full of interesting and very real people, and the Church was going through a time of evolution, both liturgically and pastorally. We had small everyday bibles covered in denim called the Good News. We thought it was really cool to have denim-covered bibles as wearing denim jeans was quite a new thing then. Guitars were played in Mass for the first time and a lot of older people thought it was terrible to have 'that rock music' for hymns instead of organ music. My brothers had longer hair than me back then, and the *Rolling Stones* and *Beatles* did not have grey hair... in fact they had hair! Things seemed fresh and exciting.

As a young person I was always interested in the fact that some people suffered and some didn't seem to; some had a lot of things and some didn't have any and I wondered what we could do about it. My heroes of the day were Martin Luther King Jr, the African-American pastor and social-activist who fought for the end of racial discrimination in America through prayer and non-violence, and Bernadette Devlin, a young Irish activist who fought for justice in Ireland in the 1960s and 70s.

I felt inspired to try and be like them and see if I could be part of changing things for the better, even while living in a small rural city.

I decided that a Social Work Degree would be a good start, to not only help others, but to help me to grow and develop into someone who was not only committed to improving the lives of the most vulnerable, but into someone who was wise and knowledgeable, and who acted for good reason and not because I thought I knew what was best for others.

And even though I feel more mature and wise now than when I was a teenager, I have never felt I have arrived or have got there, but have realised that every day, every week, is just another day or week of being a little more mature, a little more developed, a little wiser.

And life continues to give us opportunities to grow and change. We just have to see them as opportunities, not problems.

When I was asked to be guest speaker for today, I felt very honoured and quite moved because Saint Ignatius' College has been a very important part of my life.

I arranged to catch up with Mr Coffey to ask about how this year has been for the school, so I could reconnect a little and get a feel for the College before I wrote my talk.

On the day of my appointment with Mr Coffey, as I drove through the gates and into the driveway of your beautiful College, I felt my heart race and a wave of emotion wash over me.

I hadn't been at the school since 2005, when my third son, Jesse Frick, was in Year 12.

Two weeks before the Year 12 examinations, Jesse was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis, (called MS) which is, simply put, a disease that causes all your muscles to stop working so that you eventually end up not being able to move at all. For some people this disease can take many, many years before your muscles stop, but for other people, the disease takes hold in their bodies very quickly and they very soon cannot walk or use their hands or arms, or do much for themselves.

Jesse was diagnosed with what is called progressive MS, which means his body is degenerating very quickly. He is now 27 and, in the last 9 years, he has deteriorated to a point where he is confined to a wheelchair and cannot walk at all. He has to have his food cut up for him, needs help dressing and needs an electronic bed and electronic recliner chair as he cannot sit up by himself.

When Jesse was in Year 12 he was Vice Captain of the Boys (it is a different structure now I hear), and Music Captain. He performed in all the school musicals and was in the Stage Band, the Concert Band, Senior Vocal Ensemble and General Choir. His school rock-band won *Battle of the Bands*. He played First XI Cricket and First XVIII Football.

He loved his school and drew much strength, not just from his friends and teachers, but from the spiritual culture that St Ignatius himself passed down through many hundreds of generations to people like each one of you.

A Jesuit education is about '*Young women and men of competence, conscience and compassion, living by a faith that does justice.*' You know, it's very real and very effective, this Ignatian culture that you have been immersed in and educated in.

I remember in 2004 when I was helping a refugee family whose five children had been released from the Baxter Detention Centre into the care of *Centacare*. Their parents were still held in detention and one of my responsibilities was to support the children. The two older boys Alamdar and Monty, came to Saint Ignatius' College in Year 10 and 11. They stayed for two years and became part of my family and the school community. They loved being at the College but things didn't go too well for them in terms of how the government saw them, and it became clear the government was going to put them back into detention and then deport them back to Afghanistan. One day, not long before they were put back into detention, I was driving Monty somewhere and he spoke to me about how scared he was and he started to cry. He said he wanted to pray but didn't know what to say to God. He then remembered he had learned St Ignatius Prayer of Generosity at school and said "Pauline, this is the only prayer I know, so I will say this." And while we were driving in the car, Monty, with tears running down his face, prayed the prayer out loud.

*Lord teach me to be generous.  
Teach me to serve You as You deserve;  
to give and not count the cost;  
to fight and not heed the wounds;  
to toil and not seek for rest;  
to labour and not ask for reward,  
except to know that I am doing Your holy will. Amen.*

Such was the goodness and influence of the school in Monty's life.

Yes, your life has been immersed in the school for many years, especially the senior students and, whether you realise it or not, it runs in your veins.

You can watch a footy match or a basketball match and, if it's not your team playing, you may not experience it or remember it or have feelings about it, as you would if it was your own team that was playing. When your own team plays, for example, you become really immersed in it. You feel the energy running through your bones and the adrenalin pumping, especially if it's a close match.

At school, you have been immersed for so many years and although you may not use words like 'passionate' and 'excited' to describe how you feel, you may not realise the very rich experiences you have had and how they have become part of who you are, your values, your beliefs, your knowledge, your opinions, all have been formed and shaped by these experiences.

And, in years to come when you see an old photo of your class, drive past the College or attend a school reunion, you will feel those memories quicken your heart-beat a little and a stirring of your emotions.

Right now, for the Year 12s especially, I am sure you cannot wait to finish your exams, leave school, and begin that wonderful other life you may think is called 'freedom'. But think for a moment about the things that you know you have learned at the school about life and the things you will miss about school, as hard as that may seem now.

At Jesse's end of year Valette Dinner, when he was in Year 12, the students were given a book which contained bible passages, reflections, thoughts and prayers. This book never leaves Jesse bedside-table, even after all these years. Two years ago Jesse had to have a stem-cell transplant using his own stem-cells, which required high doses of chemotherapy and he became very seriously ill. This book was on his hospital bedside table and, as the MS has affected his eyesight and he can no longer see very well, he would still try and read from the pages as they gave him strength and comfort.

I remember when I was visiting him in hospital and he was in a room that was totally isolated so that he would not catch any infections, the hospital Chaplain saw me and said Jesse was having a real effect on the young nurses in the ward. She said that when one of the nurses said to him 'how can you cope with losing so much? You can't play the guitar or piano anymore, you can't sing anymore, you can't walk or play sport or go out with your friends much anymore. How do you do it?' Jesse's reply was that everybody has their crosses to carry and his was just a little bit more obvious than others.

Jesse's faith and strength to cope with so much, really had the staff talking and he is grateful for the formation the College gave him because when he felt he had none of the usual things to draw upon about himself to make him feel good, he discovered that his belief that God would never leave his side and always pour love and strength into him. This was very real and powerful.

The noise of the world is very loud – it yells at us 'what to wear, what to do, how to do it, what to listen to, what and when to drink' – to name a few. It does this through television programs, radio, social media and magazines, and many other ways.

You know, the greatest driving need of an adolescent is the need to belong. We all want to belong and feel part of a group or community, but at your age the need is at its greatest. That is why it seems important for you to dress similarly, hang around in the same groups and feel pressure to act the same way as your mates and friends so that you are not seen as being 'different'. Back in the cave-man days, if we were kicked out of the group, we got eaten by a Woolly Mammoth or starved! And that is where our need to belong comes from, but it is at its strongest in our teenage years.

I do talk-back radio every fortnight and, because I work in a Catholic organisation, if I mention my faith, I am always careful how I mention it, as people ring up very quickly to complain if I ever mention God.

You see, the noise of the world now tells us that it's not only uncool to mention God in your conversation, it's now become inappropriate.

There has been research done on your generation and you are called the 'millennials' because you were born around the time of the new millennium. Research suggests that your age group isn't angry about religion or God but that people your age are just not interested. God is simply 'out of sight - out of mind', because the world just seems so much more interesting and more amazing than God.

What I am inviting you to think about today are *what are the most important things in your life?* For the graduating Year 12s, it might be to get a good ATAR, to have a great schoolies and relax after the pressure of this year. It might be family, your friends, your future career. But if your choices were taken away and your dreams evaporated because of a tragedy, or a significant health challenge, what would be the most important thing in your life then?

When Jesse was diagnosed (9 years ago this week), it was such a shock. Jesse had started having pins and needles in his face and legs and was getting very tired and was sleeping a lot (when I thought he should have been studying for his Year 12 exams). We thought it was a virus and so did the doctor. But then Jesse started having trouble walking up the stairs at school and then one day, at cricket practice, as he was running in to bowl, his legs gave way underneath him and he fell onto the pitch. A few days later he started seeing spots before his eyes and this was all happening while Jesse was waiting to get an appointment with a neurologist.

When we were told it was MS, we were sad and worried, but we thought it could be twenty years before he would deteriorate. As we walked out of the neurologist's rooms, I said to Jesse "You'll get there, it will just be a 'different' there now."

Jesse dreamed of going to the Elder Conservatorium of Music at Adelaide University to study a degree in Jazz Voice. They only accepted two students a year to study voice and Jesse was one of them.

But by the time Uni started in March, Jesse was already needing a walking-stick to walk. In fact, by the time of Speech Day, he needed a walking-stick to walk across the stage! By the end of the First Semester, he was unable to stand up to sing and his fingers had stopped working properly to be able to play his guitar. For a few years he could still play the piano but not as well as he once did. I used to hear him playing the piano in his room and he would make mistakes and stop playing and then try again, over and over. He now cannot play at all.

He never gave up, it was just his body that did.

We all have a sense of moving forward to something in our lives and it can worry us sometimes if it is not happening quickly enough or something takes away our choice for the direction in which we want to go.

One of the many things I have learned from my son, is that if life doesn't go as we thought it would, it is not the end. You don't give up. Jesse's challenge is very extreme and I hope that none of you here ever have to face that one. But you will have your own challenges and there will be times (and probably already have been for some of you) when you will want to say 'Why me? How could this happen?'

When people say that to Jesse, his response is 'why not me? Should challenging things happen only to other people?'

We realise then that life becomes our teacher and it's the best teacher of all. When we have challenges, we don't run from them, or avoid them, but we ask ourselves, what is life trying to teach me here? Why is this challenge being presented to me at this moment in my life?

Sometimes life teaches us patience, sometimes self-discipline, sometimes that we need to learn how to laugh, or that we can't always have what we want and that it's still ok. It teaches us to let go of things that we thought we really needed, when in fact we need to let go of them in order to make space for something else.

But I believe the most important thing in life, no matter what happens, is to know we are loved, that our life on this earth is worth something, that the world wouldn't be as wonderful or as interesting if you were not in it, and that our life can make a positive difference to others.

I used to say to my children, don't look at the world and feel overwhelmed, don't try and take on solving all your problems or other people's problems at once. The power you have is in the moment you are in, with the person you are with. Whether it is someone sitting next to you on the bus, at school, in a shop, at home. It's how we treat people in that moment that changes the world.

So to the Year 12 students – you have worked hard, you have done your best, even though for some there have been difficult circumstances. You are moving now into a new phase in your life. Take a minute to observe your feelings. Are you feeling excited, a little apprehensive, a little curious about what lies ahead?

Be clear about what you believe in, what your values about life are, and don't be afraid to be true to yourself. Especially, believe in yourself and even though you'll make mistakes, and some of them may be big ones, remember, good people make mistakes. Life is messy, human-beings are messy, and our mistakes are life's way of teaching us to forgive ourselves and rediscover the path that best suits us.

At the beginning of this talk I mentioned the people that inspired me and, through this, I felt invited to keep growing into a person that can make the world a little better. Think about how it would feel if someone was inspired by you? That people looked at the way you live, the way you treat others and the way you respect yourself. Always take a moment each day, to think about your day, think about your connection to God and to those around you and believe you are being guided and protected.

I congratulate you on your completion of your College years and I wish you every success with your examinations and the years ahead.

To the other students of the College, thank you for listening to me and every blessing for the coming years.

And to the staff of the school, thank you for your dedication, hard work and for being the instruments of learning and change that you are.

You were all loved by God into this world because God knew the world needed you. Enjoy.