

Thank you, Headmaster, for your introduction and your invitation to come and talk with the School today, it really is an honour. I also appreciate that the School has gone to great efforts to make it possible for me to get up the seemingly never-ending stairs into the Memorial Hall. I can re-assure them, however, that going down is always a lot easier, but they do need to bear in mind that I tend to pick up speed very quickly! So best not to stand on the downhill side.

This my first time back in this hall since prize giving 1985 and thinking back to that day, if someone told me what the future had in store for me, I'm really not sure how I would have handled it. But a reality of life is you can never be totally sure what lies ahead. There will be events in your life which are unplanned and unexpected: these could be good events or they could be things which are more challenging. I suppose the story of my life is an extreme example, but I hope there are some things which I can pass on to you from my experiences that might be useful.

Firstly, I should tell you how I find myself up here talking to you today. Even before coming to Merchiston, my strengths and interests were always much more physical than academic. I loved every type of sport, but it was at rugby and athletics in particular where my main talents were most apparent, and I played rugby for Scottish Schools and won the Scottish schools discus competition while at Merchiston. I also had a few great lines prepared about my academic achievements during my time here: however, I still recognise a few teachers, so I think it probably best if I move swiftly on. It would be fair to say that academically I was definitely the sort of person who tended to do what was needed to get by, much to the frustration of my teachers. Thankfully, however, the school managed to encourage me enough to get the qualifications I needed. But, apart from academic and sporting activities, my time at Merchiston also helped develop me personally and played a large part in anything I've gone on to achieve.

On leaving Merchiston I went to the Scottish School of Physical Education to study a sports degree. My sporting career went from strength to strength, and I represented Scotland at U19s and U21s, and played for West of Scotland, and Glasgow. Not long after leaving College I accepted an offer to go and play for a club in Napier, New Zealand. It turned out to be a decision which would lead to the biggest life changing event of my life. I was playing a game against local rivals when, after I intercepted a pass, was tackled by a couple of players and fell on my head. I knew instantly what had happened and remember vividly the thought flashing through my head that I had just broken my neck. I then fell unconscious and was later told that my heart and breathing stopped for about 90 seconds. After a couple of weeks in intensive care I was flown down to the spinal unit in Christchurch. At this point I was unable to move any part of my body below my neck and I was told by the consultant that I would need 24hr care for the rest of my life.

I was determined, however, that this would not be the case, although my wife may say that they got it spot on, as I'm sure many wives would say that their husbands

need 24hr care. After about 3 months I'll never forget trying to move my right thumb and seeing a flicker of movement. In all, I spent about a year and a half in hospital undergoing rehabilitation, and I still get regular physio and do as much exercise as I can to keep fit.

It goes without saying that it's been a long and difficult path to where I am today. Not only in dealing with the challenges of everyday life but also dealing with the need for a complete change in terms of where my life was heading. I can't really describe how difficult the process of coping with a loss like that is, and unless you've been through something similar, I don't think people can really understand. However, I suppose I'm here today because I've managed to struggle through those difficult times and make the most of my life following my injury.

After a brief career in the pub industry, I went back to university in New Zealand and studied for a degree in psychology and neurosciences. My interest in this was sparked by wanting to find out more about the central nervous system combined with an interest in how people's mental attitude affects recovery. After that degree and another 5 years of university study and work I completed the last of four degrees and qualified as a clinical neuropsychologist. I now work in the regional neurosciences centre at Newcastle General Hospital, with people who have suffered neurological injury or illnesses.

Over the years I have had time to reflect on what has happened, the cruel twist of fate, which has led me to where I am now. I was given a great start in life having the opportunity to come to Merchiston, as you have, but it will be up to you what you make of this opportunity. Each of you will achieve different things in life and some of those things you may not even of considered as yet. I'm sure if I had told some of my friends at school that I'd been thinking about my future and thought a career in clinical psychology was the thing for me I would have been laughed out of the room - although they possibly could have agreed that I might benefit from seeing a psychologist.

Because of the difficulties I have encountered to get where I am today I've learnt a lot about myself and it has helped give me an insight into the amazing resilience of people. So I'd like to share with you now some of the important things I've learnt:

1. Firstly, as I've already mentioned life can be unpredictable. It's up to you to find your own ways of dealing with that. With most things in life you are able to weigh up decisions – which University? which job? But life also involves events that you have little or no control over, and these can be good or bad. I made the decision to play rugby that day, but could never have predicted or even imagined what the consequences would be. At points in all of our lives we are confronted by events that will test our resources and it's how we deal with them that I think tells us more about ourselves than the good times. Nelson Mandela said 'the greatest glory in living lies not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall'.

2. Despite these uncertainties you should never being afraid to try things. I don't regret playing rugby, although clearly I might have decided not to play on that particular day. I'm also sure that the consultant in New Zealand would never have thought I would sit-ski every year, complete my PADI scuba diving course in Australia, kayak regularly, have paraglided, parasailed, jet skied and complete the Great North Run using a handbike. I can't imagine my life without having challenged myself by doing those sorts of things. So, make the effort to do things you want to do and don't be afraid that things won't work out perfectly. The only way to be sure that you won't succeed at something is not to try it.
3. Take time and appreciate life. We spend too much time rushing from one thing to another. You probably have already discovered how competitive life is and how much pressure is involved in succeeding, but I think it is important to make sure that you take the time to look around you and appreciate other things. Earlier this year, whilst skiing in Whistler, Canada, I can remember just sitting on the lift thinking what a beautiful place it is, and about what I'm doing and how far I've come – often we just don't take enough time to simply reflect. And I'm not just talking about clearly amazing situations like skiing - I'm talking about the things in life which become routine and we tend to take for granted. When I think of things that I really miss it's often the simple things such as just being able to get up and go for a walk that I miss. So, take time to reflect and appreciate life.
4. Value the things that are really important, family and friends. I can't imagine how I would cope without the support of my wife and family and also my friends. They will be there to share in your achievements but it is also those people who will stick by you when things are tough.
5. Try to look beyond first impressions – I'm sure when people see me for the first time there is a tendency to feel sorry for me or even pity me. I'm pretty sure, however, that once people get to know me a sense of pity is not what they feel – possibly a sense of irritation. It's human nature to make snap judgements about people, sometimes those judgements can be pretty accurate but sometimes they can simply be wrong.
6. Something that has been particularly importance to me and has certainly helped me get through tough times is hope. From the early days after the injury I never believed what the doctors told me and I've proved them wrong in a number of ways. But central to this has been the hope that things will improve and also that someday research into treatments into spinal cord injury will achieve one of the holy grails of medical science; repair of the central nervous system. Since my injury, science has come a long way to achieving this, and I remain confident that within the not too distant future there will be treatments that can reverse or prevent some of the devastating consequences of a spinal cord and other neurological injuries and illnesses. Hope is a very powerful thing and can help you not only when things are tough but also in achieving your goals.

7. Related to hope is attitude. Attitude really is everything. The way you think about things will colour everything in your life both in terms of how you feel about others and yourself. I'm sorry, but I'm straying into psychology a bit here - but question the way you think about things and the judgements you make. As humans, we need to weight up situations and make judgements quickly often with very little information. These automatic and often subconscious thoughts about yourself and others may not always be helpful but the reality is that they shape the way you see the world and define your personality. They can be difficult to control or change, but try to see the positive even when things seem difficult. Don't spend too much time dwelling on things that have happened that you can no longer influence, but focus instead on the possibilities and have the confidence and belief in yourself that you can achieve.

And finally, the biggest tip of all is, woman are always, always, always right. (Actually my wife wrote that one!)

I still look back with great fondness on my days at Merchiston and I'm very grateful to my parents for giving me the opportunity to come here, but I also know that it was an opportunity which taught me things far beyond the curriculum. It helped develop personal characteristics and attributes which have enabled me to cope and succeed despite the worst life can throw at me. You only get one chance at life: there will be times which aren't easy, but try to remain positive and strive for the things you want to achieve, but also make sure you take time to appreciate life.