



## Abbey Gate College

Dear Parents, Children & Invited Guests



What a lovely event this is. What a fantastic opportunity to pause for a short while, and to say well done to our children for everything they give to each and every day at Abbey Gate College – their kindness to each other, their politeness to their teachers, their curiosity to learn, their willingness to have a go at something different, their courage to make mistakes and move forward, their desire to better themselves as an individual, their commitment to make their College and, indeed, the wider world a better place.

And it is a real pleasure for me, too, as I come to the end of my first year in our wonderful school, to be here and to share in this evening. Some of your parents may recognise this, but I do find myself on occasions, when I am talking with my own daughter, describing my work with words such as: “very important”, “very serious”, “very responsible”. It is, and there are days when I can get to the end of them and feel quite tired, because all the meetings and discussions were “so important, so serious, and so responsible”. But it is certainly helpful to be in a place, surrounded by the smiles, energies, and enthusiasm of so many young people. For all of us, as adults, we do appreciate that, and tonight is about thanking you, as our pupils, for all of that.

When Mrs Hickey asked me to speak tonight, I thought a little about what may be of interest to you, and then I decided. Pigs. Tonight, I'll talk to you a little about Pigs.

And to begin with, I'll show you some. Well, in this instance, some people dressed as pigs. Including me. Now, which of these not-so-little piggies do you think I was?



And if you are sitting there and already wondering: why was Mr Jenkinson wearing a pig costume, because I thought he always wore a waistcoat, shirt and tie, even to bed, have a closer look. At the time of this, I was in a different country, quite a long way away, and our clothes may give you a clue?

Now, do you know much about the Chinese New Year? For example, it is later than our traditional New Year, usually towards the end of January. It is also arguably the most important national celebration of the year in China, with families coming together, special food, and lots of dragons. Each year is also linked with an animal. It is a little bit like our signs of the Zodiac, but not the same, even though there are 12. And there is an order, which is determined by the story behind them, which I will tell you now.



A long time ago, in China, the Jade Emperor decided there should be a way of measuring time. On his birthday he told the animals that there was to be a swimming race. The first 12 animals across the fast flowing river would be the winners and they would each have a year of the Chinese zodiac named after them.

All the animals lined up along the river bank. The rat and the cat, who were good friends, were worried because they were poor swimmers. Being clever they asked the strong ox if he would carry them across the river. The ox agreed and told the rat and the cat to hop on his back, and he would take them. With the rat and the cat on its back, the ox was still a strong swimmer and soon took the lead. They had almost reached the other bank when the rat pushed the cat into the water, leaving it to struggle. Just as the ox was about to win the race, the rat leapt on his head and on to the bank to finish first. The rat was congratulated by the Jade Emperor, and the ox, who now realised it had been tricked, had to accept second place.

The tiger was next, because of its strength, followed by the rabbit, who hopped from log to log to cross the waters. The dragon could easily have won with its big wings, but it arrived fifth, because it took extra time to help the rabbit, by blowing big breaths of wind to push its logs forward. Sixth place went to a sneaky snake and seventh to a startled horse. The goat, monkey, and rooster worked on a raft between them, and made it across the river as a team. The dog was eleventh, because it took time to bathe in the river. And the pig came last, as the twelfth animal, because it stopped to eat something and then fell asleep!

I am going to come back to what this story may mean for us tonight, but before then, let me tell you a little more about what happened while I was looking like this.

On the occasion of the costume, we were celebrating the Year of the Pig and there was a tradition (so I was told, although this was not mentioned when I interviewed for the job) that the leadership team had to perform something for the very large staff team we had of over 500 people. And so I found myself wearing this pig outfit and learning a traditional Chinese dance, with ribbons, to traditional Chinese music!

Ok, you may think, that's not too bad. Hmm. What you cannot see on this photo, but may be working out, is exactly where my eyes are. Because, they are not where the pig's eyes are – my head is not that large... And the costume makers had not thought to include a sight-grill into the mouth. So, once the pig head was on, I was blind. All I could see was a tiny amount of the ground immediately beneath me, if I looked down.

To get onto the stage and into position, each one of us had been led on by the hand. Once on stage, we were now completely by ourselves, able to hear, but unable to see. The traditional Chinese ribbon dance music started to play and we all started to wave our long ribbons in time to the beat. My pig then had to step forward, do a few extra special swirls of the ribbon, and step back into line. On cue, I moved forward, waved my ribbons around enthusiastically, as if I knew what I was doing, heard the crowd cheer, and then moved to step back into line. Except – I had no idea where the line was. And because the steps forward I had taken were little dance steps, I hadn't a clue how far I had actually moved on the stage.

So, still waving my ribbons, vaguely in time, I began to shuffle backwards. I could see a tiny amount of the stage floor beneath my toes as I looked straight down, but I didn't want to look behind me, because that would be obvious to the audience – my smiling pig expression had to remain front-facing. So, I shuffled a little bit more, clueless as to where I was on the stage. And then I felt it. That feeling when your tummy suddenly jumps inside your throat, your heart beats three times faster than normal, and your breath stops. My right foot had nothing beneath it. I had unknowingly shuffled right to the back of the stage, where there was a very large gap and a deep drop into complete nothingness.

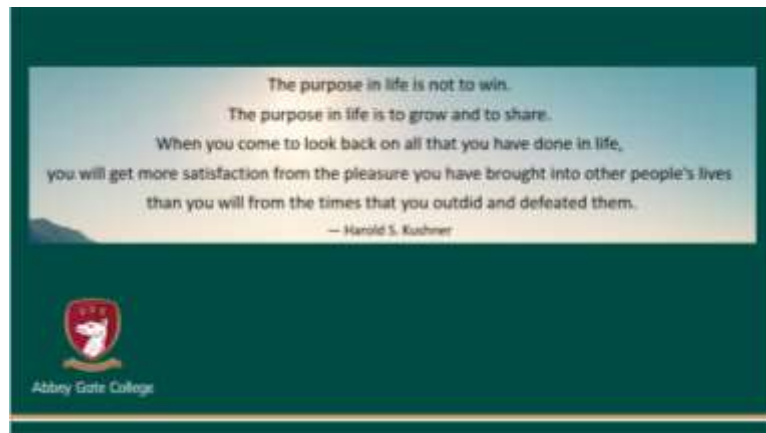
I could feel my body losing its balance. I madly swirled my arms in great big circles, still holding the ribbons, as I desperately struggled to position my weight on the one foot that was still on the stage. Somehow, I managed to tilt forward, bring my right foot back onto solid wood, and quickly shuffle a couple of steps forward; while still waving my ribbons in big arcs of creative dance movement. We finished the performance. Everyone clapped.

Afterwards, all that was on my mind was how I had nearly fallen off the stage and broken several bones, or worse. But all I heard from everyone who watched was how impressed they were with the authenticity of my large, Chinese ribbon arcs that I had kept making. No-one had noticed anything!

Now, my birthday actually falls in the Year of the Pig. To the Chinese, I am a Pig. And according to the Chinese Zodiac, people born in the Year of the Pig are honest, frank, brave, and polite. Chinese Zodiac pigs are also meant to be calm in appearance, but with an inner strength. Maybe it was my true Pig that came out when I was on stage: in those moments, I was terrified, but I kept on dancing, and even gained audience plaudits for my ribbon work! I was proud to be a Pig.

But in the story of the race across the river, which position does the Pig come in? That's right – last. And which animal came first? The rat. And the rat came first by tricking the ox into giving it a ride on its back, and then by being unkind to the cat, by shoving it into the water. Yes, there is intelligence there, which the Emperor rewarded in the story, but the winning of the race comes very much at the expense of others.

And this is why tonight's Celebration Evening is not just about giving prizes to those who come first in things, however we may measure that. In the story of the race across the river, I like that the dragon held back to help the rabbit, and I like that the goat, monkey, and rooster work together as a team to go across on a raft. Life is not about winning. How we can make a positive difference to the daily lives of others matters to us all, at Abbey Gate College. And as for our own, personal achievements – the only person we should be in competition with is who we were yesterday.



I will finish with this thought from the American, Harold Kushner: *The purpose in Life is not to win. The purpose in Life is to grow and to share. When you come to look back on all that you have done in Life, you will get more satisfaction from the pleasure you have brought into other peoples' lives than you will from the times that you outdid or defeated them.* That is worth having a little think about...

Thank you for asking me to speak tonight. And well done to all of our prizewinners and for all that we have celebrated tonight for each and every one of you.