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UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

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The Hon. Justice Michael Kirby CMG\*

Life has a tendency to go round in circles. As you get older you will feel an irresistible urge to return to places of your past. From time to time I have indulged this temptation in recent years. I have travelled back to my primary school (North Strathfield Public School in Sydney) and to the "Opportunity" school at Summer Hill into which I was streamed at 10 years of age. I have also walked in the class rooms of my old high school in Sydney (Fort Street). I have wandered around the grounds of Sydney University. This is definitely a sign of mid life crisis. But there is no doubt that the wanderings spark off memories. Seeing places, once so familiar but unseen for decades, it is inevitable that thoughts will be triggered off in the mind by suddenly remembered events and images of long forgotten people.

Recently, I had the unnerving experience of a return to the speech day of my primary school at North Strathfield Public School. Happily most of my family were there with me on the platform. They included my two brothers who had sat in the same class rooms as I did, nearly forty years ago. I had to give the Annual Speech Day address. The pupils were assembled, attentive.

What could I possibly say to these bright young pupils looking at me with wide eyes, sitting there quiet and still whilst this very old Judge (I was then 47) gave them words of wisdom?

When I was at school many such elderly gents came along. Normally they urged us to be good at sport (where I was hopeless) or to strive to do well in our studies (where I did rather too well). Unfortunately, I took the latter advice a little too seriously. So when it was my turn, 40 years on, to speak to the students, my instruction was (and is) a little unorthodox. People like me are supposed to give orthodox messages. "Pull up your socks!" "Do your best!" "Study harder!" Well, I will do nothing of the sort.

My advice is to enjoy yourselves. For life is short, however unbelievable that may seem when you are young. By enjoyment, I do not mean destructive, unkind or selfish acts. People who are selfish or self centred are quite frequently shunned and isolated by their fellows. Sometimes they get what they deserve. Instead, I mean to seek friendships and in due course love from fellow human beings and to offer it in return. There is a lot to be said for the Christian ethic of turning the other cheek. I will always go further than others in reaching out in friendship - even to enemies. I believe that this is a strength. It even pays off in the long run because nothing is so destructive as hatred and envy.

So this is what I told the school children in my old school. I am sure that many of the parents disapproved. The last thing they wanted was an "authority figure" giving a message such as

this. "Enjoy yourselves?" - "Pshaw!" they said. Sadly, young people have to make choices which influence the whole course of their future lives. Not enough of them in Australia stay in education. If you have any talent at all, you should seek to develop it for it will enrich your life - especially if it is talent in music and books which can brighten up the dullest hour. But in the end, it is not those who come top of the class who necessarily have the fullest and happiest lives as rounded and fulfilled human beings. Often, like me, they work too hard for that. Keeping it all in balance is what is important. And remembering that so called achievements are trivial in absolute terms. Even to become Prime Minister of Australia or to win the Nobel Prize is insignificant, when measured against the infinity of space and the eternity of time which precedes our birth and will succeed our death. In that short interval of life which we have, we should seek to be kind, loving and forgiving. And we should also seek happiness and fun - especially when we are young. These qualities matter so much more than worldly achievements. The latter are "shadows, not substantial things".

To sum up. Enjoy yourselves. It's later than you think.