

Start of Year Assembly: Shibui and Kintsugi

Welcome to you all. I celebrate your return and hope that you had a wonderfully relaxing and refreshing break. To those who join us for the first time today, whether in the Thirds, the Fourths, or the Sixth Form, I offer the warmest welcome. I hope you will have a wonderful time in the years ahead, and I am sure you will bring fresh talent and enthusiasm to the school.

This morning, I would like to reflect on the successes we have enjoyed as a school and look forward to the year ahead. There is little doubt that last year ranks as one of our best ever. We won not one, but two national trophies in hockey and in cricket. This year has begun with yet more success, as our U15 team travelled on Sunday to Arundel to take part in the national final of their cricket tournament. They did brilliantly to reach the final four in the country, as lost only to the eventual winners. In academic terms, we have also hit the heights. The GCSE and A-level results were superb and place us amongst the best schools in the country. This gives us a tremendous springboard from which to approach the year ahead. We should be proud of all that we have achieved, and excited about what we will do next. In order to guide our thoughts I have been reflecting about this assembly and what I should say. My reflections have brought me to introduce the perhaps unusual topic of porcelain, specifically Japanese porcelain, and two Japanese ideas that I hope will be of interest.

When we think about pottery and porcelain, the mind goes first to China, where the art of making beautiful things out of fired clay began and was perfected. The earliest pot that we have found in China dates back to 20,000 years ago. Porcelain was not produced until about 200 BC, still almost 2000 years earlier than we managed to make it in Europe.

However, it was in Japan rather than China that I first began to take an interest in porcelain. The Japanese do not have quite such a history of making porcelain, but they have made elements of it their own. What they make is beautiful, fascinating, and may have a message for us this morning as we look ahead to the new academic year.

Many Japanese pieces of porcelain are made with a particular concept in mind. The Japanese describe the concept as *shibui*. An object which displays this quality is a *shibusa*. *Shibui* is an aesthetic of simple, subtle, and unobtrusive beauty. It is characterised by simplicity, naturalness, everydayness and imperfection. It can be hard for those of us brought up in the Western tradition of aesthetic beauty to understand *shibui*. *Shibui* has been described as elegant simplicity. Effortless effectiveness. Understated excellence. Beautiful imperfection.

Here are some images to illustrate what I mean. *Shibui* can be found in pottery. Or garden design. Or interior house design. It is also used to describe personal qualities. Expert singers, actors, potters, and artists of all other sorts are often said to be *shibui*; their expertise causes them to do things beautifully without making them excessive or gaudy. Today, sometimes sportsmen are said to be *shibui* when they contribute to the overall success of the team without doing anything to make themselves stand out individually. The apparent effortlessness displayed by athletes such as tennis player Roger Federer is an example of *shibui* in personal performance. For the Japanese, *shibui* is found in all art and in everything around us - including ourselves.

To this aesthetic of *shibui*, the Japanese have added a further refinement, which is especially found in their pottery and porcelain. This is a style the Japanese call *kintsugi*. *Kintsugi*

translates as “golden joinery”. It is the art of taking broken pottery and repairing it, using lacquer mixed with powdered gold. It is very beautiful, and also gives us a profound thought – that breakage and repair are part of an object, and that something broken can be all the more beautiful for it. Here are some examples. Beautiful, aren't they?

As a philosophy, kintsugi can be seen to have similarities to shibui, an embracing of the flawed or imperfect. Not only is there no attempt to hide the damage, but the repair is literally illuminated. It is celebrated. I have used a Japanese phrase in assembly before: ‘Fall down seven times, get up eight.’

That resilience has sustained the Japanese people over the centuries and it can sustain us. The key is not to pretend we are perfect, not to hide our insecurities or failures. Instead we recognise them, accept them and use them to remake ourselves. We come back stronger.

How does this relate to us? What is the message that I spoke of at the start of this assembly? Well, let us look to the year ahead. We want to make it a success, by whatever terms we use to define success. For some, that will mean making an excellent start at a new school. For others, the focus will be more narrow: it will be defined as achievement, whether academic, sporting or cultural. It might be about achieving a certain level of performance. It might involve the development of personal or moral characteristics.

I imagine that every single person in this room has a particular and personal goal in mind when they look to the year ahead. For each of us it will be different, for all of us it will define and shape the way in which we work, the way we relate to each other and the demands we make of ourselves. Shibui and kintsugi have much to teach us in this process. Shibui suggests that we will be most successful in our goals when we approach them in a spirit of humility. We will not win our battles with arrogance and bluster, but by embracing the principles of shibui: simplicity, naturalness, everydayness and acceptance of imperfection. Let us focus upon elegant simplicity; effortless effectiveness; understated excellence and beautiful imperfection.

And as we do so let us recognise our true natures. We are none of us, at the start of this new academic year, beginning with a blank slate. We carry with us our past, and the journey which has brought us to this point will have left its mark upon us. None of us can make a claim to be perfect. All of us are flawed and imperfect. And this is where the message of kintsugi is important.

Let us not hide from our flaws and scars, but acknowledge them as an important part of where we have come from. If we are to succeed in our goals this year, it will be in part because we have been able to bind up those parts of ourselves which are broken. Let us, like the Japanese kintsugi artists, heal ourselves with gold illumination. Let us take what needs to be improved, and make that mending our greatest celebration.

Last year we enjoyed wonderful success. Our academic achievement has been remarkable; our sporting successes have brought us national standing; our music and drama and art and design technology show our creativity and talent. Above all, in finding this success, we have also shown our character. Your personal and moral qualities, which you brought to every activity and enterprise, do you and the school credit. Well done - and let us step forward into the new academic year with, hope, ambition, energy and confidence and in the spirit of shibui and kintsugi.