

**Principal's Speech on Speech Day 8<sup>th</sup> November, 2018**  
**"Wah Yan education is about equipping you for success AND for failure"**

Mr Leon Ko (高世章), Reverent Fathers, Distinguished Guests, Parents, Teachers, Alumni, Friends, Graduates, and Students,

Let me bid a very warm welcome to you all to this important occasion for Graduates and awardees of 2018!

Before I begin, just a bit of explanation for the theme of the decorations for tonight: It comes out of something shared at the Graduation Dinner of the Class of 2018 in July. It was a quote that **Fr McGaley** wrote in my Graduation Album – class of 1977. The quote was **"Ideas are like stars, we may not reach them; but we guide our path through life by them."**

Tonight we are really honoured to have Mr Leon Ko, celebrated composer and alumnus of Wah Yan to be our Guest of Honour.

Leon has worked for musicals, films, Chinese opera as well as other art projects. His music has been performed in Hong Kong, Taiwan, the mainland China, the USA, other parts of the world and he has won numerous awards in all these places. He works with celebrities, young artists as well as inexperienced students. Leon's artistic journey has cut across many boundaries and his work appeals to both the masters and the mass. His achievements are what Wah Yan and Hong Kong can truly be proud of.

Actually, Leon was my economics student, and I can claim to have made my small contribution to music by failing to "contaminate" him with my subject, so that he was not distracted from embarking on a career in music and art!

Leon stands as a much needed "alternative role model" for our students and graduates: There are many doctors, lawyers, accountants, government officials among our alumni – all good careers that do much good to society. But I would like our students to also open their minds to the possibility of "roads less travelled" – such as a career in art, which is less structured, less stable, more risky and yet one

that may allow for more room for creativity, and that which presents one with the rare chance of directly touching the hearts of many.

**No, art cannot save lives, but it can make lives worth living.** Of course, music is just one example of the “**Roads less travelled**” – there are others, such as what another Wahyanite on this stage – Fr. Tsui – has chosen. I am not saying that all of you should be musicians or members of the clergy or that you should refrain from being a medical doctor or a lawyer. I am just imploring you to listen not just to what everyone else is saying, but also to your heart and to God and be open to different possibilities.

Next I would like to give a brief report of the school.

The most notable thing of 2017/18 is surely our **DSS exploration**. We went through rounds of consultation and surveys, culminating in an application to the EDB in February 2018. However, the EDB replied in July that our application was not successful. This is undoubtedly a very disappointing result, but let me assure all in the Wah Yan community that our determination to continue with our vision and our commitment for continuous improvements in the quality of our education will remain unchanged. **We shall continue our efforts of renewal for sustainable development that permeate our culture, structure, processes, and formation of teachers and school leaders.**

Actually, a lot have been going on in the school besides the DSS exploration.

Regarding school development, this is the first year of the new 3-year School Development Plan with two Major Concerns. With respect to Major Concern One: “Enhancing Self-directed Learning”, various training workshops on learnings skills were organized. A habit for reflection and self-evaluation is a key quality of self-directed learners. In this regard, students were guided by the Form Teachers to do a weekly 10-minute “*examen*”. Bearing some similarity to mindfulness, the *examen* is a technique of prayerful reflection and helps us detect God’s presence and discern his direction for us. For non-Christians (or not-yet-Christians), it is also a great way to reflect and grow. Form Teachers also guided students to have evaluations and goal setting exercises after the mid-year and the final examination. The Student Association (“SA”) and Extra-Curricular Activity Clubs were also required to have evaluations in their activity reports.

With respect to Major Concern Two: “Fostering a Caring and Respectful Community”, we have introduced in 2017/18 the practice of a daily Morning Prayer so that the whole school starts the day with a sincere and grateful heart. Programmes such as the “High Table Dinner” were also organized to heighten students’ awareness of their manners.

Our big brother support programme (named the “JASER” programme), the compulsory WAMFO<sup>1</sup> service programme, the Magis programme to Cambodia, the AYP, Community Service Team, uniform groups including Scout and Red Cross as well as a host of teams serving the school and fellow schoolmates such as prefects, librarians, the SA, etc, are fertile grounds to nurture students’ care for their community. This year, *Magis* (the new name for the Catholic Association) has also incorporated experiential service programmes during Lent visiting the homeless and volunteering at the Food Angel in Sham Shui Po. Another new initiative is an alumni-led programme “Wah Yan Summer School” in which our students volunteered to teach underprivileged primary school students in Hong Kong.

To nurture caring and respectful global citizens, a number of international exchange programmes with overseas Jesuit schools including Tomsk (Russia), Seattle, Hungary, and Taiwan were organized.

To enhance our approach for continuous school development, our School Self Evaluation Working Group (“SSEWG”) and the School Betterment Committee (“SBC”) also held a day retreat at the end of the school year to review the progress of our School Development Plan, identified good practices and areas for improvement and made adjustments to our School Annual Plan for 2018/19.

In terms of academic achievements, our graduates have done very well in their DSE exam. For example our JUPAS offer rate was about 80%, which is significantly higher than the Hong Kong average. Among those with local degree offers, about 80% were from among the three top universities in Hong Kong: HKU, CUHK or HKUST. A total of 13 students got offers from either medical schools or law faculties, including 6 law double-degree offers. Our students also got offers from programmes including architecture, economics, finance, arts, science, social sciences, business, biomedical sciences, surveying, occupational therapy, mathematics, etc.

---

<sup>1</sup> ‘WAMFO’ stands for “We Are Men For and With Others”.

But Jesuit education is not just about academic studies. We also put great emphasis on fostering students' whole person development through a vibrant campus life with plentiful opportunities to participate in various co-curricular programs - and our gentlemen have done very well in this aspect too. Four years in a row, our school has ranked 4th in our overall sports achievements (taking into account all 17 major sports categories) among all boy schools in Hong Kong and Kowloon. Besides sports, numerous awards and trophies have also been won by our music groups, our debating teams, drama teams, chess teams and uniform groups, just to name a few.

But prizes and honours aside, the most important reward for our students in their active participation in such programmes is the rich experience they have gone through in the process – with this, they discover their potentials, develop proper attitudes and generic skills as well as form lifelong friends.

For all the academic and co-curricular achievements of the graduates and students, I would like to thank all teachers and staff for their dedication, and the WYOFF, the WYHKPTA, and the WYHKPSA for their generous support! Most important of all, I would like to take this chance to thank all the parents without your love and sacrifice your sons' achievements would not be possible. Let us give them all a round of applause to express our gratitude!

Now a few words for our graduates. I assumed principalship of Wah Yan in 2013 and you were just F.2 boys. Now you're graduates. It is amazing to witness your incredible growth and a tremendous privilege to accompany you in this wonderful journey. You have heard numerous speeches by me through these years, so what are my parting words for you?

Since our fail bid for DSS will no doubt leave an indelible mark in the year 2017/18 – your final year at Wah Yan, perhaps I'll share my thoughts on failure and how it relates to our liberal tradition.

To put it somewhat startlingly, most schools may be focused solely on equipping their students for success; but the liberal education of **Wah Yan is intended to equip you for success AND for failure**. By being relatively more liberal, we tend to impose less restrictions and provide fewer specific formulas of success for you to

follow, and in so doing we allow you to fail more often. **Do we feel good when you fail? No! Do we deliberately make you fail? No! But do we believe that there is grace in failure? Absolutely!** It is implicit in the Jesuit spirituality of “**Finding God (or “goodness”) in All Things**” – ALL things – happy or unhappy, easy or difficult, successful or unsuccessful. And if finding God is something worth celebrating, then being good old graduates of a Jesuit school, **we should celebrate failure as much as we celebrate success.** Why?

Firstly, the reason for celebrating failure is that **failures make us wise.** When we succeed, we feel good, but when we fail, we learn. One of my intellectual heroes is the philosopher Karl Popper. An important idea in his philosophy of science is that successful experiments will not help advance scientific knowledge because there is nothing new coming out of experiments that materialize exactly according to established theories. It is only those experiments that don't occur as predicted that will open our eyes for the possibility of new knowledge.

Secondly, **failures make us strong** – They build up our resilience muscles. Yes, failures are like working out with our resilience muscles. Someone who has only known success is actually very vulnerable – he will easily breakdown the first time he is faced with failure. However, if we have endured numerous experiences of failure, and provided that we have the Jesuit optimism of Finding God in All Things, then we will become tougher. And “when the going gets tough, the tough gets going”. Furthermore, if we dare to fail, we will be willing to take more risk for the sake of learning and growth, which ultimately determines success.

Thirdly, **failures make us humble.** A person who has never seen failure will easily develop an illusion of invincibility. He will become arrogant and impatient about seemingly lesser beings around him. He will then lose that ability so endeared by the Jesuits – the ability to reflect. But in reality, we are not that smart or strong! Being human, we are all sinners with lots of weaknesses. Arrogance, impatience and lack of reflection are sure ways to disaster.

Yes, a Wah Yan education is about equipping you not just for success, but also for failure. And if one ponders on the life of our Founder St Ignatius, one would realize that *his* seems to be a life littered with failures – but by opening his heart and mind to listen to the meaning of such setbacks, they turn out to be necessary steps in his path towards forming his spirituality and building the Society of Jesus – and, nearly

500 years afterwards and tens of thousands of miles away, here we are, still benefitting immensely from what he started.

Let me end with one of my favorite quotes from the humanist psychologist Carl Rogers in his article called "On Becoming A Person":

*"I believe... adjectives such as happy, contented, blissful, enjoyable, do not seem quite appropriate to...this process I have called the good life... But the adjectives... more fitting are... enriching, exciting, rewarding, challenging, meaningful. This...is not... a life for the faint-hearted. It involves the stretching and growing of becoming more and more of one's potentialities... when the individual is inwardly free, he chooses as the good life this process of becoming."*

**Those who stop learning and growing upon their graduation are living lives of the "walking dead". If we don't want to be like them, let us choose a life of "becoming". And if we are equipped not just for success but also for failure, then we will have:**

**The strength to endure hardship,  
The humility to be reflective, and  
The wisdom to take every failure as an opportunity for learning, growth and "becoming".**

**And with these qualities, I can assure you that you will be truly alive for every moment that you live.**