

### **88<sup>th</sup> SPEECH DAY ADDRESS**

Madam Special Guest, the Board, Headmistress, staff and students of Achimota School, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. It is an honour to be selected by my mates, the awesome Class of 1990, to give this year's address. I am grateful. The theme for the event is 'Championing education which is nationalistic in orientation' and mulling over the topic a few observations came to mind:

You have probably heard allegations of corruption within our judiciary, lurid details of judges letting off armed robbers for as little as goats (live ones of course!) and 1,000 Ghana cedis. There are also frightening tales of palm oil mixed with cancer-causing agents being sold in our markets. (Students, even your dear "doch" may no be longer that safe!). Again, even as we sit here the very foundations of this great institution of learning are threatened by selfish individuals who have chosen to claim and sell the land in order to generate private profit.

The common theme running through these examples is of individuals seeking private benefit over the collective good of society. In the immediate term, they gain but in the long run, society is worse off. Stuck in a developmental rut, we are like vehicles at a traffic intersection with broken lights, each one sneaking inches ahead regardless of the rules and none moving forward by much as a result of the chaos. The tragedy of the commons has become sadly Ghanaian.

**How did we get here? How did the national interest become this subservient to our individual selfishness? Have our ways of shaping up our children played a role? A few reasons, outlined below, may partly explain our sorry situation. Analysing these could help us gear our educational system towards churning out more socially-responsible citizens.**

**The first is our limited educational focus:** In theory, the curriculum for our school system seems broad but in practice it is geared towards academic outcomes. Our schools tend to churn out experts at pushing paper within the immediate contexts of their jobs. In putting so much stock on academics, this system deemphasizes values and ethics. It fails to acknowledge that although knowledge is a useful tool, the addition of principles to it creates more balanced individuals. In the end it is not the brightest kids in class but those who built values who end up shaping society positively. Ask Samson in the Bible. He got to the top with a deep fighting knowledge base but could not stay there because he lacked character.

**The second constraint to national progress is the declining quality of education:**

Even where education is accessible, quality has suffered. The long-term decline is attributable to a number of factors; population growth outpacing infrastructural development, an inadequately trained and ill-motivated teaching corps, and increasing emphasis on quantity instead of the polished finished product. Across all levels of the educational spectrum, values and a sense of national pride have become losers in the quest to churn out high numbers of school leavers.

**Our definition of education has also drifted.** Education is supposed to be holistic. A lifelong journey that extends beyond the classroom, it is shaped by family, community and our own experiences until our last breath. Over time however, this definition has subtly changed. It could either be the growing prominence of the nuclear family or the faster pace of urban living, but in narrowing our definition to the classroom, the objectives of our offspring have melted into the cult of the self and not the community. This, after all, is the selfie generation!

**Add in systemic failure** and you have a society in deep malaise. Our system almost sets us up to fail. Try going the straight and narrow path and the frustration is depressing. Take traffic infractions. Whereas elsewhere a speeding ticket would suffice, in Ghana you might have to report to court in a number of days, spend long, otherwise productive hours in there and probably not have the case called. Why would a 20 Ghana cedi bribe not circumvent the frustrating cycle? These bottlenecks cut across all aspects of our everyday lives and raise the costs of selflessness so high that one is almost foolish trudging the clean path.

There are many more contributory factors. Together with those listed above, these have confined us into cocoons of hypocrisy, dancing to the discordant tunes of self-promotion and corruption while crying out in selective amnesia when new drama like that of the judiciary unfolds.

**There is a way out. There has to be. Because countries that we call great today have plumbed these depths and later emerged with lessons learnt. And because we owe it to ourselves and the generations after us to create a better tomorrow.**

**To start on the long road to recovery we must redefine education.** It should no longer just mean work in the classroom. Education must be seen as a complete learning experience, beginning from the home, through school and the broader community. Parental involvement is key as evidence suggests that children are better balanced when they are brought up within a godly, firm

and loving home environment that is complemented with the academic rigour that a good school provides. In showing interest in our children's school output, gaps are more likely to be identified and corrective actions taken before these gaps become holes in the character of the young individual. Character is built first and foremost at home.

**Within our school system the curriculum must change.** Emphasis should be placed as much on values and community service as on algebra and literature. This change must go in tandem with a renewed focus on quality. To this end, the government's drive to build 200 Senior High Schools should be matched by investments in improving accessibility, teaching standards and overall quality.

**Our leaders must also press the reset button.** Here, we do not just mean political leaders. We mean leaders across all aspects of our lives, from the classroom through to the church. It is difficult for a young student to understand what selflessness means when he realizes that his teacher puts in more effort during his private class than when he is doing the same work for his employer. It is just as difficult for a doctor to put in long hours without adequate conditions of service when the politician he is negotiating with breezes through traffic, hazard lights blinking, in a wastefully large, tax-funded vehicle. That same politician is likely to fly his family members out to the UK or the US when they are ill, disconnecting him from the dysfunction that typifies many of our hospitals. It gets worse. Apart from a select few, most supposed men of God seem more interested in the salvation of their bellies than the souls of their flock. When leaders put self first, their followers do the same. And when they relinquish their right to self their followers do the same.

**New meaning must be given to success.** Success for us means among other things a nice house, a couple of cars and the occasional vacation abroad. This broadly accepted definition has filtered down to our young ones. Most Ghanaian kids today aspire to jobs that promise these symbols of wealth. This definition of success is flawed and must change. Success means identifying and fulfilling our various destinies here on Earth. That way we leave legacies behind. Jesus did not build a house. Yet in his simple, selfless life he was and still is the most successful person who ever lived. We need to instill in ourselves and our kids that each individual's calling is different. And each calling is important. The garbage collector who cleans the street well, removing filth and reducing the risk of disease is successful. The nurse who attends to her patient on time, offering kindness even on an inadequate pay cheque is successful.

Societies that equate altruism to success have gained much more than those that idolize fleeting symbols of wealth. It's an irony that between 2006 and 2011, Nigeria, with social norms frequently similar to ours, was on some accounts the world's second fastest growing market for champagne. This statistic partly reflects economic growth but is also suggestive of a preoccupation with illusory symbols of wealth. Yet when Ebola broke out last year in West Africa it was Medicin Sans Frontier, a medical charity founded in France, home of that same champagne that provided the most support for victims. There are no prizes for guessing which has left a more lasting legacy in this instance.

**In giving new meaning to success we should reinforce positive narratives.** We are fixated with negative stories and in so doing have allowed the positive to slip into the unrecognized unknown. Narratives matter. They shape our national discourse and agenda and seep into the impressionable minds of our young ones. And when acts that generate negative narratives are deemed by society to have been lightly let off they send the wrong signals. A certain Mr. Woyome has more name recognition than Dr. Yankyera, a plastic surgeon who has changed lives with his free surgeries on people with skin injuries. Or Dr. KP Asante, who has led research on reducing the incidence of malaria in Africa. These individuals, like many in other fields, may not hog the limelight but have worked hard at improving the lives of others. They are successful. Positive examples reinforce values and remind us that it is still cool to lead simple, selfless lives that make humanity better. For each judge whose name is making the rounds for bribery there are several who have quietly upheld their values. They should be celebrated as loudly as the bad ones are vilified.

**Finally we must be the change we want to see.** All talk of changing our beloved land will come to naught if we do not first change ourselves. Each time we give out a tin of milk or sardines to escape just sanction, each time we pay a pliant head teacher to let our unqualified child in, we win individual victories. Yet these victories are pyrrhic, perpetuating the cancer of the self that ultimately eats away the cells of national good and progress.

**We are in a state of national near-crisis. If we can lead change within ourselves and within our immediate spaces the sum total of our efforts will lift us out of our despair. That change must start today. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. And if we start now we can proudly thump our chests when the journey is done and say we did it for God and country.**

**Ghana must, can and will work again!**

**Thank you and God bless.**