

*Three imperfect people; one perfect idea!*



*A twelve-year-old boy begins seventh grade in Atascadero, California. His social studies teacher gives the class an assignment to devise and put into action a plan that will change the world for the better.*

The scenario poses a challenging question and one I felt important enough to share in a school assembly earlier this year. Education, as people so often tend to describe it within a school setting, is very much about covering a syllabus and passing exams. But that should never be where the definition ends. Real education is about so much more, including context, relevance and purpose. Most important is the ability to know how to use what we learn, and to be able to distinguish knowledge from wisdom. For this we need empathy and an aesthetic appreciation of the highest order. All the learning in the world will be as nothing if it makes no impact to our pursuit of making changes for the better. Theatres of war, situations of long-term conflict, greed and our relentless destruction of the world's precious resources, would imply that we still have some way to go in really understanding where best we should be placing value in education.

I wondered what ideas our pupils might offer to this challenge. In seeking an answer, some of our thinking would inevitably leap toward high-tech, super-efficient solutions, data-driven and sustainable too, each in their own way, very worthy. But changing the world for the better will need a fundamental shift in how humanity thinks. Kindness is a good starting place, and with this the necessary moral strength and integrity to build a better community, motivated and selfless in equal measure. The problem is in finding the role model who has already mastered this, and of course, none of us can ever claim to be that perfect. Perhaps a clue lies within the original assignment: the answer is to be found in the *actions* that we take, and the motivation that underpins those actions, rather than in one specifically modelled invention. What is noticeably clear is that the solution would need exceptional creativity.

*Pay it Forward* is a novel by Catherine Ryan Hyde, published in 1999, and later adapted for release as a film. Essentially the story is about people, and that makes it about us ... all of us. It's about networking, but rather than networking that is focussed on personal gain, it is networking born of truly honourable deeds.

The twelve-year-old boy called his plan 'Pay it Forward'. The principle is simple enough. The recipient of a favour then does a favour for three others. The favour might be on any scale, small or large, but it needs to be something the receiver would not have been able to achieve of their own accord.

The trouble with 'simple' is that it doesn't satisfy our attraction for all things whizzy and wonderful! 'Complicated' always seems more worthy of our consideration, and the beauty of a simple plan becomes so easily lost within the whirlwind of an increasingly narcissistic society. So much of what we do and how we represent the world seems to depend entirely on where we place ourselves within it, rather than seeking out the greater good. How often is the real beauty of something, perhaps a mountain, a waterfall, a wonderful work of art, reduced to exist only as the backdrop in the landscape of the ubiquitous 'selfie', the wallpaper behind the image of me, and you, and probably me again! Technology affords an immediacy that is addictive, and society feeds that addiction with its fixation on instant self-gratification.

The 'Pay it forward' principle steps boldly in the face of all that. It is deeply reflective and thoughtful. It requires us to pause and to notice the value of our gratitude rather than just the value of the favour we have received. Then, with a certain creativity in the actions we will choose to take in sharing that generosity of spirit with others, in paying forward, we do begin to change the world for the better, one small gesture at a time.

One person becomes three people, three become nine, none perfect in themselves, but each empowered with one perfect idea ... paid forwards!

It is surely worth a try!

*Yvette Day*

*Head and Master over the Choristers*