



From the Principal

Peter Clague



Feet of Clay

Amidst the myriad of warm and welcoming conversations that I have had meeting new colleagues and parents during my first couple of weeks at St Leonard's, I have enjoyed discussing all manner of topics about this wonderful College and the people who make it hum. Including, on one occasion, one parent's love of throwing clay on a potter's wheel. That is the joy of this job; one minute you are discussing curriculum, the next minute, ceramics.

Mind you, amateur pottery is a risky business, isn't it? There are a million perfectly formed cups and bowls lining the shelves at David Jones, you'd think "How hard can it be?" With thousands of people churning out identical crockery every year, here's a chance to apply your individual stamp, exercise your latent creativity, gift something unique to the world – why not give it a go?

So you find yourself in a pokey wee studio, following a wizened fellow in 1970's sandals and sporting a beard like a saltbush. You glance scornfully about. Earnest types in homespun cardigans are hunched intensely over lumps of misshapen clay, muttering to themselves or wrestling wild-eyed in mud, as they try in vain to forge something that resembles a man-made object. You can't wait to show them how it's done.

Twenty minutes later, you're seated in front of your very own potter's wheel, looking like the victim of an industrial accident. You are covered from head to toe in sludge, your fingers are bleeding, and there is a crater whirling round where your bowl once was. "Watch how she's doing it", bush-beard advises, nodding at a slight woman, half your size, who is effortlessly coaxing a cup into existence.

But you don't do multi-tasking. If you take your eyes off this maniacally spinning clay for an instant the whole thing is liable to rocket off the wheel, decapitate the person next to you, and replaster the ceiling. "If I could just stop the wheel for a moment?" you whimper, as the demonic slab of mud rears up once more and grows limbs of its own.

The bearded-one chuckles, squeezes your shoulder with a wiry hand and says cryptically, "The world turns." There's no time to contemplate that, as you throw your body across the wheel, sacrificing yourself to protect innocent bystanders from the next imminent detonation. The world turns. It makes you think.

Having worked with children and their families for over thirty years (not to mention raising four of our own with my wife Sarndra), I have come to think that parenting is just pottery with people. Everyone else in the world is making their own kids, so you decide to have a go. Getting going is fairly easy. Your children are born, unblemished raw material, and you begin to mould them.

It all starts off fairly smoothly – they're just little lumps rolling round on the carpet – but the task gets trickier as they rise up. They grow and grow and soon you're working flat out to keep up with them. Then little eccentricities begin to appear. They wobble, maybe start to tilt off centre. Even lurch out of control at times.

Increasingly, you're desperate for a break, a chance to catch your breath and reflect, but the wheel is relentless and never stops turning. Rough edges may form, but each time you deal with one lump, another appears. You spot thin patches of instability, or bulges where they are too strong. You want to stop and smooth each one out for them, but life doesn't slow down long enough, and your child's personality continues to form unbridled beneath your hands.

Here's what I have learned about pottery and parenting:

- both are messy, awkward, and can leave you with mud on your face
- both are completely unrelenting and totally absorbing
- it's impossible to make identical pieces
- success lies in the time you spend shaping a solid base
- strength or fragility are simply matters of perspective
- if you mess it up, you can't really give away the end result to the relatives for Christmas.

Ultimately though, what matters most is that the child you craft as a parent is utterly unique, the only one of its kind. In the years ahead, I look forward to getting to know the artisans of St Leonard's College, those parents and teachers shaping exceptional individuals like the ones I have met so far. You already seem to be doing a pretty impressive job, so I count it a privilege to have the chance to add a little gloss along the way.