

Former Cherwell student, Anna Glynn, spoke at our GCSE Certificate Evening on 28th November 2019.

This is her speech:

Good evening everybody.

Thank you for having me here for this very special event.

I received my GCSE certificates way back in the distant past of 1997, which is actually a different century. All of you whom we've come together to celebrate today weren't even born, then. And I'm keenly aware that the vast gulf between us is that I spent my formative years at Cherwell with no internet, no mobile phones and just four television channels.

So why is this person from another century standing up here to talk to you all?

It's a good question

My name is Anna Glynn. I was a student at Cherwell from 1995 to the year 2000. I am a theatre maker, the founder and Joint Artistic Director of Flintlock Theatre and Flintlock Theatre School, which is a fancy way of saying that I make pieces of theatre and teach young people how to do that too. And I have a confession to make. I should not be here.

In the Netflix show *The Good Place*, a group of humans blink awake (after dying) and read a sign on the wall in front of them that reads **Everything is Fine**. They are told this because they are the very best of people and they have made it into '*The Good Place*'. Except, it turns out (**spoiler alert**) it is not true. As we've suspected all along, they are not the very best of people. The four protagonists are, in turn, a rude, self-centred hedonist, a materialistic socialite, a petty criminal and a moral philosopher whose ability to have a positive impact on the world is constrained by his crippling inability to ever make a decision. They are not the very best of people. They are average people, and over the first few episodes as they run around trying to conceal their averageness, it is revealed that the Good Place is not, in fact the Good Place at all. It is, instead, a construct designed to torture them.

There were times when I wondered whether Mr Price inviting me to give this speech was a construct designed to torture me. Because, here's the problem. I'm an average person. I'm not the very best of people. My path in life has been far from smooth. My flaws have held me back. And yet somehow, here I am being told, through this invitation to speak to you, that I am in *The Good Place*. That I am good enough to be invited up here to be an example to all of you. I could re-write my story for you all and tell you how brilliant it's been. But I've watched *The Good Place*. And I know what happens when you pretend to be something you're not. Everyone ends up wearing zebra pyjamas and giant giraffes bound through the neighbourhood. Okay, those of you looking confused need to watch the show.

The thing about *The Good Place* is that on the surface of it, it's a show about the idea of an afterlife, morality, what we're all doing here. But as I looked at the selves the characters were straining to project to keep their place in *The Good Place*, it put me in mind of something else about our contemporary existence. The selves we attempt to project to maintain our own sense of self-worth. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, selfies, filters. Perfection, we tell one another, is the only acceptable path.

Well, in my experience, that's just not how life works. So I decided to take the course of action that those characters in *The Good Place* take a whole series to choose. I'm taking off my filter and I'm going to share my ugliest selfie with you. I'm going to tell it like it is, or how it was. The unvarnished story of how I've got to where I got to. Or, a version of it at least.

Picture a kid with crooked teeth and braces with her hair pulled back tightly into a low bun, a stark mono-brow, one single strand of fringe hanging straight down over her right eye, and another piece floating off high into the air like a curly antennae. She's wearing a pair of ill-fitting jeans, a t-shirt and over it a baggy checked shirt that she's wearing like a comfort blanket. Oh yeah, and she's frowning. That is Anna Glynn arriving on her first day at Cherwell School in 1995.

Here's the thing, I had been bullied over several years at middle school so instead of viewing Cherwell as a fresh start, I made the bold decision that I wasn't going to try to be friends with anyone. That's right. No-one. If someone smiled at me, I frowned and looked off to the side. Strangely enough, this did not draw people to me. I developed a reputation for being cold and aloof, which then became something I had to live up to, and so a cycle was perpetuated. Bullying had made me feel that people didn't like me, so I'd isolated myself and now more people didn't like me. It wasn't something I felt that I could easily roll back. So I upped the ante instead. I walked with a swagger and attempted to project the sense that I didn't care what anyone thought about me whilst agonising about what everybody thought of me. I had the strange accolade of neither being a favourite with pupils nor with teachers. At least, I thought, no-one's bullying me. No-one was talking to me, either, but that was beside the point.

Drama helped. I was good at drama. I did drama GCSE and Theatre Studies A-level. I got the lead in the school play in Year 11. I joined pretty much every local drama group I could. That was it. I was going to be an actress. And yet, I was so sensitive, so alert to the idea that I might not be good enough, that when a teacher inadvertently mentioned that it was extremely difficult to gain a place in the National Youth Theatre, I quietly dropped my completed application into a bin. Not long after, I was gathered together with a small group of people that the teachers felt should apply to Oxbridge.

Oxford and Cambridge. Where all the famous people had been. Where Monty Python and Beyond the Fringe and Emma Thompson and Kenneth Brannagh and...everyone I admired had studied. Obviously, I was going to apply. Somebody tentatively queried why I wasn't applying to drama school but if I graduated from the university, I would be the first person on either side of my family to go to university straight from school and get a degree. I wasn't passing up Cambridge. And anyway, if I got into Cambridge, I'd go and be an actor straight afterwards. Like Emma Thompson did.

But I didn't get into Cambridge. So come September, I headed off to Durham University, which I hadn't visited, and which no famous actors, as far as I was aware, had graduated from. I was lonely. I was 245 miles from home. I wasn't where I was supposed to be. I was all at sea. And when I found there was a whole day when I sat in my desk chair from sun up to sun down because I couldn't think of a reason to get out of it, the university doctor helped. Drama helped too. Again. I auditioned for a role in a Berkoff play. And got it. Then I won an award – a Doscar (that's a Durham Oscar). I was invited to audition for a Shakespeare tour and I got the lead in that. This was it. I was in the inner circle of university drama I'd always dreamt about.

It was appropriate that the play in question was A Comedy of Errors for me at least. I couldn't quite put my finger on it. I was on the outside of things. I wasn't in the group. The other women in the cast always said their car was full when we were due to move on to our next touring location. When they gathered to chat in a tent, there was never enough room for me to join them. At the end of the tour, they rented a flat in Edinburgh and took a show up there. There wasn't any room for me to stay.

University drama had rejected me. I felt like that girl again on her first day at Cherwell School. If I'd owned a checked shirt, I'd have worn it like a comfort blanket all over again.

So, I was back at square one. I went home to Oxford and got a job. It turns out that going to university and then going into acting wasn't as easy as Emma Thompson made it look. The fees for drama school stood at £40,000 per year. So even if I got in, I had no idea how I would pay for it. I did my first round

of auditions. I did my second round of auditions. I was put on a waiting list for Bristol Old Vic Theatre School. I didn't get in. I cried for a week.

I worked for another year. I applied again. To all the same schools but this time, also to a little school called the Guildford School of Acting. All my favourites rejected me. And then, Guildford called. They offered me a place and a scholarship. And just like that, I was going to Drama School.

On the surface of it, Drama School went well. I won a second scholarship I got a First in my degree. I won the School's Award for Acting. But under the surface, things were not okay. I worked every evening and all weekend to pay my rent. My family was going through a horrible time. My Dad was unemployed and unwell. My parents separated. My tutors kept passing me over for casting and when I did get roles, they repeatedly cast me as men or old ladies. It was like they were trying to tell me something. Some of that industry nastiness was on show. One tutor felt we all needed a dose of reality and told us which casting boxes we fell into: The Bitch, The Best Friend, The Fat Friend.

I got an agent and moved to London. This was it. This was where it was all going to change.

I was living in a shared flat in a grey corner of west London. I cold-called companies selling professional cleaning services to earn the rent. The people on the other end of the phone were not polite. By the end of my first year, I had worked three times. I had been paid once. And that is good by acting standards.

Everybody says you mustn't give up on chasing your dreams. I'd held tight to this particular dream for as long as I could remember, like a kite in a storm, cutting my hands to shreds. I knew that as soon as I got that one big part, everything would be okay. I'd have enough money. My crippling self doubt would go away. Anyone who'd rejected or bullied me or made me feel on the outside of things would want me, finally, on the inside of things. And the only way to get to that point was to keep going, no matter what. And then, my Dad was diagnosed with prostate cancer. So I did what any sensible person would do. I went on tour.

A job with a large national company touring the country was supposed to be the beginning of the dream. I think you get the idea now. It was not. But one wonderful thing happened. I met Robin Colyer, someone I'd known in passing at drama school but who I really only got to know across the two weeks that we were in the same town. And that's all it took. Two weeks to feel on the inside for the first time. Someone's natural first choice. Well, seven years and two weeks in truth. When my Dad died in November, Robin stuck by my side like a limpet. And it was Robin who articulated the fact that despite us following very different paths, we'd ended up in the same place. Both completely disillusioned with the dream we'd dedicated our entire young lives to. So one day, we gave it up. We left London. We moved into a tiny cottage on the edge of Wheatley. We grew vegetables on an allotment. We learned how to live together. And we started to plan.

Flintlock Theatre School came first. We wanted to create a school that welcomed you in to a completely safe space and took care of you, that supported you to express yourself, to explore all the ways that theatre and performance could help you to truly be yourself, where anyone could come and discover their creativity. Two years later, we saved £300 and we staged the first ever production as Flintlock Theatre above a pub in Jericho. As more and more people bought tickets and came to watch the show, all those feelings of self-doubt melted away. Because it was our show that we were in charge of.

And here I am seven more years on, standing on my old school stage talking to you. I'm a mum to three children. I have my own home. I am surrounded by friends. I work with amazing people every day to make theatre that audiences come back to see again and again and again. Students who've gone through our theatre school have gone on to Cambridge and LAMDA and drama school in New York and Netflix shows. Life is good.

As the characters in *The Good Place* find, being human is too complex to ever allow us to blink open our eyes and find we can sum up our lives with the phrase 'Everything is Fine'. I am not where I expected to be. It was not pretty and it took a long time. But at some point right around the moment when I dared to let go of one dream kite and start building another, I started to find my way towards my good place. And my journey isn't over. I have a path ahead of me and it will not be perfect. I will not be perfect.

And neither will you. If my story has anything to offer, I'd like it to be that you should embrace imperfection. In fact, I would urge you to wholeheartedly distrust perfection. There are no very best people. There are only people. You are good enough. And our good places, our very best place, is the one we build for ourselves.

Thank you.