‘Destiny is not a matter of chance; it is a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for, it is a thing to be achieved’.

(William Jennings Bryan)

Is our existence ruled by fate? Is our life’s journey predetermined, the course already charted from our conception? Are we all simply pawns on a chessboard or puppets responding mechanically as a higher being manoeuvres and controls us? Are we fragments in a tapestry, components of a master plan, pieces slotted into a grand scheme, mindless cogs in a wheel? Or instead do we have sovereignty over our own destiny, freedom in our decision making and input and choice into how our life unfolds?

Initially we have no choice with whom we are conceived, how we enter this world, the location or time of our creation, our genetic makeup or the constitution, capability and competence of our parents. We survive our birth and our early years because of circumstance, the action or inaction of other individuals. These random decisions and our inheritance clearly influence our prospects. To this extent we are the victims of fortune or misfortune.

From the outset, providence smiled on me when I and my 7 siblings were delivered to my parents, Nance and Frank O’Donnell. Through no choice of my own, I arrived into a free society, in a time of peace, in a democratic country. My choices throughout life have been founded on the solid values imbued in me since early childhood, the focus and importance that was placed on my education, the love that surrounded me and the opportunities my family afforded me. Undoubtedly the choices of my parents made my own choices infinitely easier and ensured I had more control over my future.

I am more than satisfied with most of my life choices. There are times, however, especially this year, when I question my loyalty to my Football team, a partiality influenced by my family tradition over the generations.

I have never regretted my career pathway. I willingly married the man I loved. I revel in the family with whom I have been endowed as a result of choosing to opt for motherhood and being fortunate to deliver healthy children. Hopefully the upbringing I provided for my offspring has not in any way limited their choices.
In Primary school your parents were generally more present, hovering, directly influencing you, nurturing friendships, encouraging you, providing advice and support, deciding on social outings, accompanying you, exposing you to opportunities, tending to your needs, supervising homework, reading, monitoring your electronic devices, and scrutinising your behaviour, language and reactions. They demonstrated their approval or disapproval with celebrations and rewards or by chastising you and withdrawing privileges thus providing guidance.

‘You are not the victim of the world, but rather the master of your own destiny. It is your choices and decisions that determine your destiny’.

(Roy T Bennett)

It was probably not your sole decision to transition to Kew High School, though perhaps you were consulted and your opinion was considered. Once enrolled and in ensuing years until the present you are able to be more in control of your actions and decisions at a distance away from your parents and guardians. Generally you select your friendship group.

Options about your behaviour and attitude and the manner in which you respond to the behaviour of others are also yours to formulate. You can be a spectator in the life of the school, dwell on the fringes or participate in the many opportunities that are available to you. You can excel or cruise, collaborate and interact or work alone, develop or stagnate, be inert or enthusiastic, pessimistic or optimistic, seek assistance or go it alone.

You are continually forming your own values, deciding what you will stand for, and stand up for, what is reasonable and acceptable and what is clearly outside the boundaries for you. With each subsequent choice you are building the platform on which you will base your actions in the future.

There are however many matters that impact on your choices and the tangible consequences of those choices. Most children demonstrate an understanding of “right” and “wrong” behaviour from an early age, but debate surrounding the age of criminal liability centres around the question of when a person comprehends whether their behaviour is wrong.
In all Australian jurisdictions there are two age levels of criminal responsibility: a lower one under the age of 10, where a child is always presumed too young to ever be capable of guilt and can, therefore, never be dealt with in criminal proceedings and a higher one, between 10 and 14 years old, where courts can prove the child understood that what he or she had done was wrong according to the ordinary standards of reasonable adults.

So the consequences of our choices are seen by law to be increasingly significant as we get older.

At times a person argues diminished responsibility or mitigating circumstances or extreme provocation so that they are not held responsible for their choices and the resultant consequences. In life, however, there are no excuses.

There is no dignity in being involved in a situation where under the influence of drugs or alcohol or through lack of control, poor choices ensue. There is no honour in retreating to the defence of impaired responsibility to claim an absence of culpability. The onus is squarely on us all to be in full control of our choices.

‘It’s time to abolish diminished responsibility, the coach and horses’ defence through criminal responsibility for murder’.

(Andrew Hemming)

During adolescence there are other factors that impact on judgements and cause teenagers to make poor choices. Brain studies show the frontal lobe, which is responsible for decision-making, does not finish developing until our early-to-mid 20s. Under pressure or when trying to fit in with their peers teenagers are at a greater risk of being reactive.

At such times they are more likely to act on impulse, display minimal control, engage in risk-taking and sensation-seeking behaviours, or they fail to anticipate the consequences of their actions. There is a marked difference between what they know and what they do. The responsibility however lies with a teenager as with us all, to seek advice and be considered.

‘It is our choices that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities’.

(J.K Rowling)
People make choices that have a bearing on their reputation and on their future. As a member of the Australian cricket team, Cameron Bancroft undoubtedly regrets the ball tampering scandal; Nick Kyrgios his choice to abandon matches, to not perform at his optimum; Serena Williams her melt down at the US Open.

‘Life is about choices. Some we regret, some we’re proud of. We are what we choose to be’.

(Graham Brown)

Through the benefit of hindsight, there are undoubtedly particular moments in our lifetime which, if given the opportunity, we would replay, enabling us to act in a more considered, appropriate and reasonable manner.

‘Opportunity is a series of doors. We go through one to find the next one. The more doors we go through, the greater potential we have for making a difference’.

(John C Maxwell)

Daily we see evidence of people making choices that have dire consequences for themselves and for others: the drug user who climbs behind the wheel, the angry being who responds to a disagreement with unnecessary force.

On the other side of the coin, we witness the beneficial random acts of kindness, spontaneous and unselfish choices that have life long and far reaching benefits: the hero who drags someone from the burning premise or plucks a swimmer from the raging sea, or lends a hand to the underprivileged by unselfishly volunteering time and effort.

‘Choice means saying no to one thing so you can say yes to another’.

(Dan Millman)

There are sliding door moments in life when we ask what if, what might have been or we ponder the if only, serendipitous events, unplanned incidents, surprise meetings, connections, delays, moments throughout life when outside influences impact our decisions and shape and alter the course of our reality.
On the international stage there are multiple occasions when we exert minimal influence. On our behalf, Governments enter into conflict; seek a truce; build a wall; persecute those speaking out, or those of a different race, colour or religion; provide a haven for those without a country; close borders; investigate sustainability; wage war against waste; develop strategies to halt global warming; fund research to conquer disease. Some actions we applaud, others cause us displeasure and disappointment.

On the national stage, our members of parliament make budgetary choices that affect us all, in the realm of education, health, transport, law and order. As adults in Australia, and as members on the electoral roll, we do have an input into who assumes government and should avail ourselves of that right.

We may not be the legislators or policy makers but still we can enable or influence by our choices, by being passive or active. We can react, protest or be voiceless. That is our right and we should be cognisant of the far reaching implications of those choices and the effect on future generations

‘For all the cruelty and hardship of our world, we are not mere prisoners of fate. Our actions matter, and can bend history in the direction of justice’. 
(Barrack Obama)

We may at times, be the victims of circumstance, when there are natural disasters or freak accidents over which we have no influence. Neale Daniher did not deserve Motor Neurone Disease but he assumed control of the situation by raising funds through the Big Freeze and the Big Ride events.

‘There are two choices in life; to accept conditions as they exist or accept responsibility for changing them’. 
(Denis Waitley)

If it is calculated that we pose a danger to ourselves or others, we may relinquish our right to make choices or shape or limit the scope of our choices. If it is determined that we are not of sound mind we can have our choice curtailed by conditions imposed under the mental health act. Physical impairment and ill health can impact on our choices. In other circumstances we can be detained and restrained, and have our rights legitimately denied. In
some countries, the governments eradicate individual choice through legal processes, imprisonment, torture or murder.

With the laws of euthanasia we are now given more choice to determine the manner and timing of our death.

‘As human beings, we are endowed with freedom of choice, and we cannot shuffle off our responsibility upon the shoulders of God or nature. We must shoulder it ourselves. It is up to us’.

(A.J Toynbee)

Each day from sunrise to sunset we encounter choices.

It is our obligation to be contextually aware, to take time to deliberate and ruminate, to seek guidance, to learn, to equip ourselves with the necessary skills and knowledge, to be proactive rather than reactive, to make informed, considered and conscious choices for which we are ultimately responsible. Ignorance is no defence.

‘We are our choices’.

(Jean Paul Satre)

It is incumbent upon us to be in the best shape, physically and mentally to ensure our choices provide us with the best chance in life and the opportunity to flourish.

‘In the end we shape our lives and we shape ourselves. The process never ends until we die. And the choices we make are ultimately our responsibility’.

(Eleanor Roosevelt)

Our under developed brain may at certain stages impact on our decisions, the law may define our culpability, but in the end even if we are psychosocially immature or under the influence of a legal or illicit substance we are still personally responsible and accountable for the consequences of our actions.

‘Attitude is a choice. Happiness is a choice. Optimism is a choice. Kindness is a choice. Giving is a choice. Respect is a choice. Whatever choice you make makes you. Choose wisely.’

(Roy T Bennett)
We attribute limited credit to others for our enlightened decisions. We cannot ascribe blame to nature, God or fate for our minor, tragic or disastrous choices.

To our Year 12 students: As you leave us we trust that you have the wisdom, courage of your convictions and the sound values to make conscious individual choices of which you will be proud.

Chance and luck play their part but it is ultimately our choices that give our unique life meaning.

‘To say you have no choice is to relieve yourself of responsibility’.

(Patrick Ness)