

Good morning, my name is Sophie Ryan and I'm currently in my second year of a Bachelor of Arts/Law program and concurrent Diploma in Languages at the University of Queensland here in Brisbane. Within my degree, I'm majoring in Peace and Conflict Studies and Studies in Religion. I'm still discovering where this path will take me in the future and I'm perfectly okay with that. My parents, my mum especially, has always taught me to pursue your interests and trust, have faith, that they will guide you to where you're supposed to be. Steve Jobs said a similar thing in his speech to the graduating class of Stanford a few years ago with his advice that "You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backwards. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future." He believed that it is this trust, this belief that the dots will connect down the road, that will give you the courage and the confidence to follow your heart even when it leads you off the well-worn path. And *that*, he said, *is what makes all the difference in life.*

For me, my dots are all over the place, as you could probably tell from the lengthy title of what I study. I'm incredibly interested in the dynamics of Peace and Conflict, am fascinated by the inner workings of religions and what they have to offer the world and combining these two areas, am enthralled by the prospects of how religion and conflict culminate. I also *love* the law and the countless ways that it interacts and intersects with almost every area of life. On another spectrum, I consider myself a bibliophile: I am entranced by the world of literature and books and would be more than happy to spend the rest of my life locked in a room filled with books. Then on another level again, I am incredibly passionate about youth and the role of youth leadership in cultivating, challenging and questioning the world, as we know it. So when I'm not at Uni, I work as a facilitator for the organisation, 'Project Hatch', running retreat days with students to challenge them to realise their self worth and the potential impact they can have in life. So in a way, this small handful of 'dots', as Steve Jobs would call them, have connected to lead me here to you all today. This morning, I'd like to share with you some of the small insights I've had on my journey so far in life in relation to these areas. In particular, I want to share with you what I think are going to be some of the most pressing issues for the up-and-coming leaders of the world and problems we face in cultivating the next generation of youth.

Just before I continue, holding true to my legal education, a disclaimer: everything I say today are really just ramblings of thoughts and ideas that I've encountered in the various areas of my life, as a second year university student, grounded in my passions and experiences with youth leadership. I can guarantee to you right now (more legal jargon!) that a lot of what I believe *is* naïve and overly idealistic but as I hope you'll come to believe with me, I don't think this is a bad thing. Indeed, to me, idealism and in a sense, the optimistic naivety that most youth are stamped with, are some of the central tenets of youth thinking that we should be cultivating rather than squashing. I'll talk more about this later. But basically, please understand that I *know* I don't know everything and what I have to say today is really just me dipping a toe into the pond of discourse in this area—but nevertheless, I sincerely hope that in some way, something I say this morning might be of worth to you.

Growing disconnect

Perhaps the biggest problem I see rising in youth today is what I call the 'growing disconnect' and I think one of the biggest culprits behind this is this guy (technology). Now don't get me wrong, I accept as much as the next person the incredible opportunities technology offers leading into the future. Social media and the ever-growing connectedness of this world we live in has made it infinitely easier to grow movements of change. Without technology we would likely not all be sitting in this room together at this moment, sharing our ideas on the topics we are. I have close friends all over the world that I am able to keep in touch with *because of technology* and social media.

But there is a consequence of the digital age that casts a shadow over the youth of today—in enabling us to be so much more connected, I believe we're actually becoming *more disconnected*.

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My 14-year old sister told me the other day about how her friends wouldn't take a photo together unless they were wearing makeup. A few weeks ago I went to Sydney with my mum and we spent nearly all our time at Darling Harbour trying to get a decent photo together to document the experience—but how often are our experiences now that of trying to document them? How often do we miss the experience, because we're trying to take a photo of it?

Again, another example from my little sister. She has a rule that if she doesn't get 10 likes on a photo in the first 10 minutes after she posts it, she deletes it. My friend from university, Tom, is the same. The other day he posted a status on Facebook and took it down five minutes later because no one had 'liked' it yet. Obviously, it wasn't a good enough post, he said. Social media, while allowing us to connect with each other, reinforcing this dependence on each other that eats away at our self-worth. Too often today, youth cannot do things on their own—their actions, thoughts, ambitions must be validated by someone else. If they don't receive that validation, they don't do it. While this might seem inconsequential—who cares if I don't wear lipstick because my 14-year-old bestie doesn't like it—it *isn't*. This sets a dangerous precedent for every other walk of life, a precedent where we are reliant on others to validate our ambitions, our goals and our self-worth.

Technology, social media, the digital age, I believe, is *reinforcing conformity*. Maybe it's just a symptom of another root cause, but I see it everyday, at university, at home, at the schools I work in. In a conversation with a teacher from an all-girls secondary school the other day, I commented on how well mannered and polite the girls were. Interestingly, her reply was quite different to what I thought it would be. She said that while yes, she was proud that the girls were so polite, she believed that the girls teetered dangerously close to being 'submissive'—too compliant, too unquestioning. Too easily, she said, do these girls accept what they're told, what they're shown. They are easily led and this is incredibly dangerous.

This leads us to a somewhat different kettle of fish, but nevertheless another clear symptom of this movement reinforcing conformity. What I'm talking about is how we define 'success' today. The word, 'success', what does image does it invoke for you? For

most, it's now synonymous with fame, wealth or social status. But I simply do not think this is the case. But nevertheless, this conception of success is what penetrates every aspect of our lives growing up. For instance, for me, I've always been a very academic person. Like I said before, I just love books and I always have. This, combined with my slightly OCD inclined perfectionism, perhaps made it natural that I was always a high achiever at school. But it's what follows on from this high-achievement that troubles me. *Because* of my high academic results, everyone has always assumed that I would become either a doctor or a lawyer. *Always*. I remember once telling my maths teacher, whom I idolized, that I wanted to become a teacher just like him and his response was, "Sophie, you have greater things in store for you than being a teacher." *Why?*

These perceptions are so deeply ingrained in our society that I didn't realise that I'd fallen victim to them until very recently. You see, up until the very end of year 12, I was hell-bent on studying medicine. I told myself that that was going to be the way I helped people. That medicine would be the way I helped people in need, gave them what they didn't have. But now I realise I really had no passion for the science behind medicine, the entire appeal of medicine lied in that image of me helping people. My connect with this and medicine, lied in those stereotypes and ingrained perceptions as to success. Medicine would be a challenge, a challenge that I could overcome. Getting into medicine would mean me achieving in the top 1% of the state, achieving extraordinary academic results. Succeeding. It seems the natural consequence that if I could get into medicine, then I should *do* medicine. It actually wasn't until the morning I was to sit the UMAT exam, the entry exam for medicine, that I realised the true appeal of medicine for me. It wasn't until mum was driving me to Brisbane to sit the exam that I suddenly realised I didn't want to do medicine at all. Or rather, that what I really wanted to do was be challenged and help people, and I didn't have to do medicine to do that.

Ironically, like I've already told you all, I now study law. But I believe it's for the right reasons. Because I'm passionate about the content, it challenges me and it's fundamentally going to enable me to help people. This is what I tell myself anyway!

But my experiences have really shed light on the dangers of these perceptions and expectations that are largely forced upon us as a society. And I think these need to urgently be addressed.

The first solution I see to these problems is encouraging patterns of thinking like Steve Job's 'connect the dots' advice. But it's more than that. Tim Costello, the CEO of World Vision, gives good advice in his book, 'Hope', that I think is relevant here. He tells this story.

A father who was a coalminer took his son down the shaft into the underground pit where he worked. He said, 'Wait here in this lit space, as I need to go along this tunnel.' While his son was waiting for his father to come back, the light in the mine failed. He was in pitch darkness and screamed out for his father. Down the tunnel, he heard his father's voice command him to start walking towards him. The boy cried out that he could not see anything. His father said, 'Is the light on your helmet?' The boy replied that yes, it was, but it only threw light for one step ahead, and it was deep black beyond that. His father said, 'Well, take that step.' Of course, the boy did, and cried that he could not see any further. His father said, 'How much light can you see now?' The boy replied, 'Only about a step.' Back came the instruction, 'Well, take that step.' There was enough light just for one step at a time and, of course, by following the soothing advice, one step after the other, he finally reached the safety of his father's strong arms.

We would all prefer to see much further ahead. We want the road map and to know the short cuts to success and what success looks like for us individually. But usually we only have enough light for the next step. To get anywhere we must take that. But we get to choose in which direction to take that step and we alone can choose that direction, we must rely on our light, with the soothing words of others to help give us the courage to do so. So really, the question boils down to whether or not we are doing what we need to in this moment to maximize the light that is within us, or are we trying to look too far ahead? Take the step with the light you have. Walk in that light.

I believe that it is in this light that we also have the potential to create change. To go further into the analogy, I want to help shape the light in which youth walk for the

better. I want to help them to see the light, to recognise its presence and understand just how bright it is.

You see another aspect of this ‘therapy culture’, as Tony Robbins calls it, or the ‘growing disconnect’ that I’ve been talking about today is this belief people have that they can’t change the world. This belief that the world is *too big*, and that I am *too small*. The inherently flawed logic that my actions only affect me. This simply isn’t true and we all know it. By virtue of simply being human, I impact the lives of everyone around me. My actions are inextricably linked to those around me—to the *world* around me. On average, the ordinary person will impact 10 000 people in their lifetime. **10 000 people.** The ordinary person, not Nelson Mandella or Mother Theresa, the ordinary person. So can you imagine the impact we could have on the world if we aimed to have positive encounters with everyone we impact? The ripple effect we could have is enormous—we could shape the way they go on to affect others and do it 10 000 times over. We change the world everyday, we just have to choose in which way we want to change it.

The Starfish Story

One day a man was walking along the beach when he noticed a little girl picking something up and gently throwing it into the ocean. Approaching the girl, he asked, ‘What are you doing?’ the girl replied, ‘Throwing starfish back into the ocean. The surf is up and the tide is going out. If I don’t throw them back, they’ll all die.’ The man said, ‘don’t you realize there are miles and miles of beach and hundreds of starfish? You can’t possibly make a difference!’

After listening politely, the girl bent down, picked up another starfish and threw it back into the surf. Then, smiling at the man, she said, “It made a difference to that one.”

How do you approach the starfish? I challenge you to look at your ability to make a difference to the one, and in so, your ability to make a difference to the world.

You see, we don’t understand the impact we *do* have. We fundamentally overlook it.

I call these moments of unknown impact 'teacup moments' and I have a story behind why.

TEACUP STORY.

You see, we have this incredible ability to impact others. We will *never know* all the ways we do so. Which is why we have to endeavour to create change, to promote passion and compassion in every walk of our lives—because we never know when that will pass into someone else's life. We simply have to trust that we are, day-in-day-out changing the world.

Bamboo, after you plant the seeds, can take up to five years to establish its roots and break through the soil. For five years, you have to water that bamboo in the hope that it is alive, that it will grow. For all you know, it might be dead, but you have to trust that it isn't. But one day, after believing, hoping and trusting in that bamboo, it suddenly seems to just come alive. At that point, you can literally stand back and watch it grow. Some types of bamboo, after breaking the surface, can grow up to one metre a day!

But this is the faith we must have in ourselves, this is the faith we must have when we make decisions to try, to make the decision to change the world, to embrace our humanity in an attempt to save our humanity. We have to choose to water the bamboo, for if we choose not to, we guarantee it will die. Sometimes, people will criticize you for watering the dirt. That what you're watering is just cold, hard dirt. That it will never be anything more than that. But you have to trust that somewhere under that dirt, there is still a little bamboo seed, establishing an extraordinary root system as you water it. And one day, it will just suddenly spring to life. The inertia of its growth will make it unstoppable.

I believe if we all began to approach life in this way we would live in a radically different world. It's a simple concept but it's not a small one nor is it an easy one. I also believe that it is through youth realizing this reality that we will fundamentally change the world.

Leaving here today, I encourage you to plant your bamboo seed and water it in your everyday encounters, actions and thoughts. Make a difference to the one. Walk in your light. Embrace your capacity to create change, because indeed, this is the only way change has ever been made.