

Flame of the Forest: Dealing with Loss

By now, I am sure that you will have seen or will have heard that our beautiful Flame of the Forest tree in the Lower Playground was removed over the weekend. Sadly, the tree was dying and needed to be cut down before it fell down of its own accord.

The Flame of the Forest is a glorious tree, with its fern-like leaves and stunning red flowers. Known by its scientific name, *Delonix Regia*, and a number of other common names (Flame Tree, Flamboyant Tree, Royal Poinciana) it is often considered to be the most beautiful tree in the world. The tree is native to Madagascar, off the east coast of Africa. However, it is widely grown throughout tropical parts of the world, in particular the islands of the Caribbean, South East Asia and northern Australia, and is most often seen in parks and along major avenues. What makes the *Delonix Regia* so popular are the bright red flowers that cover the tree for many weeks in spring and summer.

We first noticed that our Flame of the Forest was in a poor state of health some twelve months ago. We have been monitoring its condition and noticed that the bark was peeling and that large areas of the trunk were crumbling and being eaten away by disease. It was necessary for us to call in a tree specialist and to seek their advice on possible treatments and to recommend a course of action. Unfortunately, the report we received was that there was no treatment to stop the disease and that their strong advice was for the tree to be removed without haste.

The Flame of the Forest has a life expectancy of around 40 years. A search of the College records indicates that this tree was planted some 45 years ago. It is wonderful that it lived for as long as it did, encased in a cement pot and located in the stark, concrete environment of the Lower Playground. In that location it endured the heat of summer and the cold of winter, the uncertainty of its water supply, and the constant battering of plastic and rubber soccer balls. This tree did not have the luxury of growing in a park or in some wide open space.

You may not be aware that it was planted along with another Flame of the Forest tree; that tree being located in the opposite corner of the Lower Playground. Some of the senior boys will remember when that second tree also died and fell to the ground. Fortunately, that happened late one evening

when there were no students or visitors at the school. There was no warning or indication that the second tree was in trouble; it simply fell.

Whether you have been a student or teacher at our College for only two months or whether you have been here to a lot longer, I am sure that you all came to appreciate the beauty of the Flame of the Forest. Some of our teachers will remember it when they were students at St. Paul's. In fact, the Head Janitor, Mr. Ko, remembers the tree as a small sapling when he joined the College forty years ago. No matter how long you have been at St. Paul's, however, I am sure that the reaction to the tree's removal would have been the same. When I was here on Saturday morning, you could feel the emotion of the boys as they left Saturday morning class or were arriving for the Scout meeting. There was quietness amongst the boys in stark contrast to the noise of the chain-saw. The only time they spoke was to ask 'why'?

It is interesting how we react to sad news. My reaction when I received the report from the tree specialist was to say 'no, we need a second opinion', as if to say that I do not accept his professional advice. I then looked for other possible solutions: 'can we support the trunk in a metal frame'; can we inject a special liquid to stop the disease from spreading'? I then started to ask some direct questions; 'why wasn't I told earlier that the tree was in trouble'. But of course, I knew in my heart that the tree had to go. My reaction to the news had gone from shock, to denial, to anger and then to acceptance.

Maybe this is how we react in life to events such as this. I know that people who receive the news that they have terminal cancer and only have a short time to live also go through the same stages of shock, denial, anger and acceptance. Those who lose members of their families or friends in car accidents or in any tragic circumstance also tend to react in a similar way. I know that some of you here this morning have gone through a loss in your life in recent times. You may well have the same experience.

What is important is that we learn how to cope with such news. In general, males do not like to show their emotions outwardly, preferring instead to remain silent. Men and boys believe that this is the way 'to stay strong'. However, remaining silent and 'keeping it inside' can often lead to remorse and depression. It is important that when we experience sadness, tragedy or death in our lives we 'move on' as quickly as possible. A starting point in this process is to talk to family and friends about how we are feeling.

It may also be a good starting point to start talking to God. You will remember that at the time of Jesus' arrest and through to His trial and crucifixion, his disciples reacted to the news with shock, denial, anger and acceptance. The important message that Christ brought to us is that there is life after death. The death of Jesus heralded the beginning of new life for man. You will remember the wonderful spirit of Mrs. Hoare, the wife of Bishop J.C. Hoare. Although she was deeply saddened by her husband's death, she knew that they would meet again in a new spiritual life. She had already moved on to a stage of acceptance.

So how do we move on after last Saturday morning? Should we replace the Flame of the Forest? We live in a school dominated by concrete and metal and with so little natural vegetation. The Lower and Upper Playgrounds in particular are in desperate need of shade. But we also need room to play and you would agree that the trees in the Lower Playground are not ideally positioned when you are trying to play a game of soccer. Indeed, I wonder how many boys over the past forty years have been injured running into the Flames of the Forest.

In the days ahead, I would like to hear ideas from students and teachers on how we can 'green' our school. In particular, I would like to hear from the members of the Gardening Club and the Biology Society. In recent months, I have been thinking about planting a name-tree for each of the Houses: Oak, Pine, Rosewood, Ginkgo, Banyan and Yew. I have no idea at this stage if this is at all possible; can you get seeds for each of these trees; will they grow in Hong Kong conditions; can they be kept to a reasonably small size; where could they be planted, and so forth?

However, I can picture in my mind our six House trees all in a row. Maybe even three of the House trees on either side of a beautiful Flame of the Forest.

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