

Earlier this year, we were happily browsing thesaurus.com in English. For whatever reason one of us was searching for a synonym for ladylike. The results horrified us - the page was pretty much a Victorian novel's guide to being a woman. "Dainty", "refined", "accommodating", "soft" - now, don't get me wrong, in and of themselves these aren't bad things. But as a blanket definition of everything that each and every one of us is meant to be? As the class gathered around the offending laptop screen, it struck me. This definition jarred. Because at Marsden we're not taught to be ladylike - we're taught to be person-like.

It's not that disregarding manners and running wild in the mud is encouraged - it's that we're taught that being a leader is more important than being a lady, that being determined is more important than being dainty, but that most importantly you don't have to choose. You can have grit AND grace.

In many ways, this is an attitude that we teach each other, as friends. Growing up, three of my favourite things were the Little Women books, The Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants and, more recently, Gilmore Girls. I realised recently that what these all have in common is incredibly different, who love each other unconditionally and all do remarkable things. You've got tomboy writer Jo, you've got sporty, headstrong Bridget, you've got sweet, domestic Meg, you've got ambitious, studious Rory, you've got dramatic, loving Carmen. Each of these women strives to find their own personal success, whether that be making a happy home, making partner at a law firm, or becoming a published author. Here at Marsden that same ethos is encouraged - the incredible class of 2016 is made up of a group of young women who are so, so different, each pursuing their own definition of what it is to be a woman. Look at Zoë, travelling all the way to Japan to teach English. Look at Dana, pursuing her incredible artistic talent and passion. Look at Victoria, who will no doubt be taking the world of American hockey by storm, or at Eleanor, who'll be saving lives through medicine. Frankly, if I had time I could include the whole year group in this list of amazing people, headed out into the world to do amazing things. I can't say a big enough thank you to you girls, who've been my second family for 11 years. I like to think that the experiences we've all shared in these, perhaps our most formative years, mean that these friendships will last a lifetime. I tried really hard to come up with a non-cheesy way of saying this, but came to the conclusion that sometimes you just have to embrace the cheese - so camembert with me. Girls, if I can say one thing to you it's brie-lieve in yourselves. You're capable of doing not just gouda, but grate things. Go into the future with open minds and un-feta'd hearts, knowing that this year group will be your roquefort the rest of your life. You Philly me with awe every day, and I can't wait to see the things that you do. I love you girls with all my heart.

I couldn't make this speech without saying a particular thank you to Maya. "Deputy" seems far too flimsy a word to describe what you have been to me this year - a best friend, a partner, an absolute angel. I think I'd be hard-pressed to find a girl with a bigger heart than you, who cares not only for those around her but for the whole world. I have absolute faith that, just as you've always said, you'll go out into the world, find what really breaks your heart, and fix it right up. I can't wait to see your superhuman passion and kindness make this earth a better place.

Of course, speaking of making the world a better place brings me to Harriette, Neakiry and the class of 2017. Your global empathy, enthusiasm and the knowledge that you can make a difference will make next year one to remember, for the Marsden community and whatever causes you set your mind to.

But Marsden wouldn't be the place of possibility that it is were it not for our incredible teachers. Whether it be early in the morning, during your lunch hour or as we frantically email you late at night, you've always made us feel like we were supported to head in whatever direction we wanted to. You turned the whole school into Virgil's Underworld, engaged in heated discussions about certain contentious political candidates, and held pizza maths way back in the day just to make sure we fully got our head around fractions - the time, heart and soul that you have put into our education has meant so much, so thank you.

Mrs Field, Mrs McConchie and Ms Williams - you've never been ones to preach "do as I say, not as I do." You lead by example every day, through tireless support, care and inspiration. Not only is it invaluable to have such wonderful women to look up to, but purely in terms of sanity, emotional stability and having any idea where we're going next year, I don't know where we'd be without you.

I think that ultimately, what it comes down to is the ability to choose. To be free of glass ceilings and closed doors, to feel that there's no one path that you're bound to. There was this one word of ancient biblical Hebrew that baffled theologians, historians and linguists alike. 'Timshel' - eventually they cracked it. As John Steinbeck put it, "The Hebrew word, the word timshel—'Thou mayest'—that gives a choice. It might be the most important word in the world. It says the way is open. You can if you will it, but it's up to you." This is one of the greatest gifts Marsden has given us. The gift of timshel, of knowing that our choices don't have to be restricted by a [thesaurus.com](https://www.thesaurus.com) definition of who and what we should be. We're in this incredible position here, standing at the foot of two or three or fifteen diverging roads. The first step can be scary, particularly when we're being told to do it gently, quietly, without disturbing any dust. But to paraphrase Robert Frost - taking the road less travelled by can make all the difference. Holding tight to the almost indescribable Marsden essence of strength and kindness, and to the love of our families and our friends, we begin on our paths towards the versions of ourselves we want to be. We're free to design our own proverbial sunsets - in fact, why not throw away prescribed proverbs all together? The stories are ours for the writing.