

James Crewdson – Prefect (Dixon House Captain)

Keynote Speech 2026

The Importance of Being Unbounded.

I want to start with something simple. Raise your hand as high as you can.

Now go a little higher. Nearly every single person just found more.

Good morning Mr Featherston, Dr Swann, Mr Angus, staff, students, guests, and my family.

In the 1960s, scientists conducted a fascinating experiment with fleas. Ordinary fleas, which can jump roughly one hundred times their own height.

Scientists placed the fleas inside a glass jar and put a lid on top. The fleas jumped. They hit the lid. They jumped again. Hit the lid again. Over and over.

Then, after a while, the fleas started jumping just below the lid. Just short of it. They had adjusted. They had learned.

Here's where it gets interesting.

The scientists removed the lid. And the fleas kept jumping at exactly the same height.

The lid was gone. But the fleas still jumped as though it was there. Psychologist Martin Seligman later gave this a name: learned helplessness. The idea that if experience teaches us our actions don't matter, we stop acting. Even when everything has changed. Even when the lid is gone.

The fleas were free. They just didn't know it.

Now. I want you to think about something.

Can you think of a time when you stopped jumping?

Maybe it was some feedback on an essay that told you that you weren't a writer. So, you stopped writing. Maybe it was a laugh from a classmate the one time you answered a question wrong. So, you stopped putting your hand up. Maybe it was quieter than that.

Whatever it was, that was your lid going on.

For many of us, the lid has been gone for a long time. The person who doubted you moved on. The classmate forgot. But you... you're still jumping at exactly the same height.

Two years ago, I fractured my lower back playing Cricket.

What happened next wasn't really about the injury. It was about the label. I became the injured guy. And I wore it. Quite comfortably, actually. The injured guy doesn't have to push too hard, doesn't have to explain himself, and always has an excuse ready to go.

Then came the UK Cricket Tour. I got myself fit enough to go, did some of the physio work, ticked the boxes, and flew to the other side of the world. I enjoyed every second of it. But there was this weird feeling underneath the whole thing, like I was watching myself have the best time, knowing there was a fuller version of me that never quite showed up. I wasn't at full capacity and I knew it.

Last game of the tour, I did the same injury.

And honestly, looking back, I'm not surprised. I'd almost fixed my body but never changed what was happening in my head. I still thought of myself as the guy with the dodgy back.

The back healed both times. The label took a lot longer.

Nobody told me I had to be the injured guy. I decided that. The injury was real, but the lid I built around it was entirely my own. I chose the label, I chose to stay comfortable inside it, and I kept jumping at the same height long after the lid was gone.

The lid doesn't just stop you from jumping. Over time, it rewrites the story you tell about yourself.

And once that story is set, you don't even need the lid anymore. You enforce it yourself. You become the jar.

Marcus Aurelius wrote this almost 2,000 years ago: 'Our life is what our thoughts make it.' Now, this man was a Roman Emperor. He had armies, wealth, and authority that most people can't even imagine. And yet, of everything he could have written about, he wrote about the mind. Because he knew, more than almost anyone, that none of the external stuff mattered as much as what was happening in his head.

What you believe about yourself becomes the boundary of what you'll attempt. And what you won't attempt, you'll never prove wrong.



We spend so much time asking: am I good enough? Smart enough? Talented enough? But the more honest question might be: what have I already decided I am? Because most of the time, we're not discovering our limits. We're confined by our old ones. And the first step forward, for most of us, is admitting the lid is still there.

Because here's what I believe: most of the ceilings in our lives are not made of glass. They're made of memory. And memory is not the same as truth.

Many of us at BGS are fortunate to have caring families, dedicated teachers, and the kind of support not everyone receives. But none of that removes the limits we place on ourselves or spares us from confronting them.

Are there things you are not trying, not because you genuinely can't, but because you tried once, hit a lid, and decided that was just the height you jump?

The fleas in that jar were never broken. They were never incapable. They were talented athletes who learned, very reasonably, to protect themselves from a ceiling.

And then the ceiling was gone. And they didn't know.

You are not a flea. You have the ability to look up. To test whether the lid is still there. To jump higher than habit tells you to. Not because it's guaranteed to work. Not because it won't feel uncomfortable.

But because the only thing that is keeping you from jumping higher is the memory of a lid that may no longer be there.

Thank you.