Good afternoon, Mr Crawley, distinguished guests, parents, friends, teachers and girls of St Hilda’s school. Welcome today to the induction of our year twelve students for 2016. For the coming year, I feel honoured to have the opportunity to represent and lead you all; the women who I know will one day have the power and confidence to change the world.

And I know even as you listen to those words, “CHANGE THE WORLD” they already wash over you, that phrase thrown around so much that it is simple to let them slide away, instead of sink in as a possible reality. We often shrug off this empowering statement, as we question how we could ever make a difference in a world of 8 billion people. And so we lull ourselves into this false notion that we are not the ones who could ever make change.

But I would argue that this is the type of fallacy that hinders girls like you, girls with the power to dream big, and live life with only the boundaries of self-doubt to confine your progress. Bringing change and making a difference may not always be about one big astounding discovery, or an act of fierce and miraculous diplomacy, but often it is the little steps that then culminate as a leap.

I’d like to share with you a story I first heard when I was nine years old. Sitting in what was then a state of the art demountable building perched on the edge of the school oval. In grade five I sat in religious education as a woman by the name of Bev Philben, shared with me a story that would change my perspective on life. The story goes something like this…”There was once an old man who used to go to the ocean to do his
writing. Early one morning, he was walking along the shore after a big storm had passed and found the vast beach littered with starfish as far as the eye could see. Off in the distance, he noticed a young boy. Every so often the boy would bend down, pick something up and throw it into the sea. As the man approached the young boy he called out and questioned, “May I ask what you are doing?” The young boy paused, looked up and replied, “Throwing starfish into the ocean. The tide has washed them up onto the beach and they can’t return themselves. The sun will kill them if they stay out of water much longer.” The old man studied the boy with pity, replying, “There are tens of thousands of starfish, you won’t make much of a difference!”

The young boy bent down picked up another starfish and threw it as far as he could into the ocean. Then he turned smiled and said, “It made a difference to that one.”

Despite the overwhelming odds against him, that young boy decided that however minor the significance, if he could, he would be the deciding factor that would save the lives of some of those starfish. He realised that change was a matter of choice. Looking around at you today, I see young women who have every opportunity before them simply waiting to be seized. Opportunities that leave you with a choice of whether to sit back watch your life play out before you, or delve into the action, take charge of your decisions and go confidently in the direction that you choose.

For all it’s worth St Hilda’s allows you to step out of the gates everyday as young women who are prepared for the world. If there were three attributes that I were to lay out as encompassing a strong St Hilda’s girl these would be: Connected, Capable and Confident.
Connection is perhaps one of the more overlooked qualities that I feel we as young women and members of a seemingly ever-connected generation take for granted. We are constantly checking our Instagram feeds, Facebook likes, and Snapchat notifications, so often that it is not hard to see how easy it is to get caught up in the web of the internet and forget about the importance of making real connections and bonds. What I always find amazing is the concept that every single person in this room has their own story to tell. And beyond these walls is another 24 million Australians, who are the hero or heroine of their own stories, each with their own villain, person to love and sidekick to confide in. And essentially passing each continent by, we can seemingly begin to realise the beautiful nature and sheer magnitude of human life. Already, a chapter of my story is bound to all of you girls, a thread of my life intertwined with yours. We as St Hilda’s girls will forever share at least the connection of attending the same school, but this year I’d like to ask a little more than that from you. In 2016, and for the rest of your life even, I want you to go in search of stories, to look for the interesting ideas and seek out everything from knowledge to experience from those around you. Connection is a stepping stone to understanding people and most importantly understanding yourself. Connection is a stepping stone to change.

Secondly, this year I’d like to instill some self-belief back into all of you. Often as girls, it is so easy for us decide that we are not experienced or qualified enough to even give things a go. But let me say now, that every day I walk into this school amazed at the astounding capabilities and achievements of all of you girls. Girls I believe that as you make connections and learn to understand those around you, so to you begin to appreciate the diversity of talent and skills that each of us possess. You learn to realise
that you are capable of so much more than you have probably ever let yourself know. St Hilda’s provides you with an endless stream of opportunities, and it is up to you to acknowledge that you are capable of anything that you endeavor to pursue. Do not let the weight of self-doubt, or the idea that you are not proficient enough ever stop you from joining a new co-curricular, or asking that question in class or talking to someone new. Be proud that you can say you attend a school where your capabilities are cherished rather than inhibited. Find where your strengths lie, and use those to match yourself up with others whose strengths may be your weaknesses. They say power comes in numbers, but I say that progress comes in teams. I want you to leave this room today with the firm belief that you are capable in achieving your goals, and that you have so many around you who are willing to help you get there.

And so finally, last but not least, the attribute I believe to be one of the most important for any young woman. Over make-up, clothes, technology and even wealth, confidence is perhaps the one thing that can set you apart in the great game of life. Your posture, your tone, your vibrance, all simple things that with minor adjustments can move you from the background to the foreground of so many situations. Girls if there is one thing, and one thing only, that I would have to define as the most significant thing that St Hilda’s taught me, it would the importance of having confidence. Although you might not realise it yet, we operate in an environment whereby our ideas are always encouraged, our opinions are not just heard but taken into consideration, and our voices are projected as one of the most the integral aspects of the school. Unlike so many, we operate in an environment where we can learn to be confident without pressure or embarrassment, everyday we are offered an unabridged opportunity to be nothing but
ourselves. Not once have i ever thought twice about asking a question, not once have i ever stopped to think that maybe my idea was not worthy of being considered, and not once have i ever let someone tell me that my voice isn’t important enough to be heard. Because let me tell you girls, right now, that confidence is a strong emotion, and with enough of it, people don’t laugh at you or shun you, they envy you because they wish they had it. And i know it’s all well and good for me to say be confident, even though i know it doesn’t always come naturally and at times it’s really hard. But know that you are not alone, you are in a place where all of us are still working to become the people we aspire to be. As you walk out the gates of St Hilda’s for the last time in how ever many years, hopefully having developed further into becoming the best version of yourself, I challenge you to walk out those gates with the confidence of a woman who is ready to change the world. And until that time comes, walk into those gates every morning with the belief that you are good enough, that you are capable, you are connected and you are strong.

My older brother Chris, a man who is far wiser than the twenty-two years it states on his driver's license, once said to me, “Courtney, life is like a game of chess. There are only two players, but so many pieces. In life it’s the same, I suppose we all have to decide: Are we going to be a player or are we going to be a piece?” Girls I believe that should you choose it, you all have the power to be players and game changers. It is not so much a matter of how you will get there, or how long it will take, but more so the idea that somewhere within you know that you have the ability to make a difference and inspire a change. Throw some starfish back into the ocean, implement a new idea, make a friend, increase your grades, challenge what you think is wrong, walk
confidently and stand proud, for you are not just implementing change, you are the change. So for 2016, in the words of Mahatma Ghandi, “Be the change you want to see in the world.” Thank you