

**SPEECH BY MS TAN WAN THENG**  
**PRIME MINISTER'S VALEDICTORIAN AWARDEE**  
**SOTA AWARDS 2021**  
**20 MAY 2021, THURSDAY, 8.00PM**

Hello!

Many of us came here as naive, eager and impressionable twelve-year-olds, our small bodies easily overwhelmed by the expanse and grandeur of the building. I remember entering this school as a young girl, afraid but excited for what this building would entail for my next six years. Time flies, and six years have passed; I think SOTA is the place to make dreams happen, whether you realise it or not. It is a great honour for me to be standing here today to represent the Class of 2020.

What does SOTA mean to us? What is the SOTA culture?

We've been through fun and challenging times together. Our cohort has always been special and stood out for being bizarre, hardworking, and most importantly, bonded. I remember fondly the days when we assembled in the hall as a school where my cohort mates planned many memorable programmes during special occasions. With all the time travelling, fantastical elements that sometimes bordered on absurdism, they showcased our creativity, imagination and our shared SOTA sense of humour. While we knew how to have fun, we also expended our energy to serve the school community and beyond.

This carried on even during Circuit Breaker last year. I am proud of how we came together, going beyond our individual needs to care for the larger community. We initiated a donation campaign to raise funds amongst our cohort and teachers to support our canteen vendors, organised a charity concert OneHopeSOTA and published a website to promote the arts in the school community, amongst many other efforts. Together, we demonstrated our strong sense of empathy and service as cultural leaders.

We also showed great resilience as a community to pull through the difficult and uncertain time. At this juncture, I want to thank all our teachers. We are extremely grateful to you for supporting us selflessly every step of the way especially in the past year when you were going through the challenging time yourselves. Thank you for inspiring us beyond the academics onto the larger lessons in life.

I look back at the Circuit Breaker period with fond memories, as it was during this time especially, that I saw how our cohort bonded to provide support for one another. From the lovingly prepared snack bags by our Parent Support Group leading to our

examinations, to our class mentors who did daily check-in sessions with us, and the special memories we created as a class such as morning sessions when we bonded over sharings of *mukbangs* (eating shows), cooking recipes, workout routines and conducting the funeral of our class pet (complete with a eulogy and burial) Hanks the Fish. All these, including the wide variety of background filters we used – such as cherry blossom backgrounds, under the sea landscapes, beach filters etc. only reveal a fraction of our peculiarity – and I mean this in a good way.

All the quirkiness, eccentricity and antics normalised as part of the SOTA culture is something I'll definitely miss. Sometimes with all this eccentricity and comicality, I catch myself wondering – is this what I imagined school to be like? But before I knew it, I found myself loving this brand of craziness. It has become part of me – all these idiosyncrasies are what makes our cohort, bursting with unique qualities and passion, come together as one.

This raring energy is reflected in our desire to challenge conventions and bend rules (sometimes to the frustration of our teachers). It illustrates our desire to be change-makers, to be people who not just conform to rules and structures, but to actively improve and think critically about existing systems. This is one of the lessons Covid has reinforced – to be adaptable and open-minded to new perspectives. We are opinionated and expressive and often make multifaceted connections across disciplines with a keen ability to problem-solve. We saw this often in our classroom spaces, where we would have intense and lengthy debates about politics, social issues and the arts. This idealisation of the world starting from the classroom is in fact what has shaped us and our values as empathetic people with a strong sense of people-centredness. I am grateful to the School for giving us this space where dreams, visions, still shapeless and intangible blobs, start to take shape.

As we continue dreaming and imagining new possibilities, many of us are also taking concrete steps into our future. Every one of us carries a spark for change and desire to contribute back to society. I am constantly blown away by the talent of my peers during showcases, performances, and in our everyday school life – the star quality one could grasp beyond the sea of dazzling light and voices. While the pandemic has highlighted the uncertainty of the future, it has also taught us to embrace unpredictability. It is okay to not know what you want, to not have a clear direction. Just as how quickly we adapted and persevered half a year ago when we all questioned in our minds if our IB exams would still be taking place, we have also moved on at a rapid pace. Many of us are currently working, interning, most of the guys have started National Service. We have stepped beyond the majestic walls of our school building, that for many years offered us protection, and are experiencing our first forays into adulthood.

And what does adulthood beckon for us?

As society evolves and technology pervades our lives at an ever-increasing rate, it comes with a greater need for us to make a connection – as it is the arts that cater to people's emotional and psychological wellbeing. What will be our role in society? Whether we choose to pursue the arts or interests in other fields, I believe the arts encompasses and permeates every aspect of our lives and that we will bring this special, unique quality wherever we go. During the Circuit Breaker, I remember my classmates having a huge uproar over the statement that “artists are non-essential” in response to a survey conducted by The Straits Times. This incident illustrated how much the arts means to us from deep within, and how much we want people to recognise its value too. It is our role to shine a light to allow more people in society to recognise and understand the value of the arts – just like how we have been enlightened. It is this very special and intangible power of the arts sparked in all of us that I believe, will carry us far in the future.

I am grateful to have had such an amazing cohort of talented, passionate and hardworking people to have shared my six years with. To the Class of 2020, thank you for the beautiful memories – I think we all know we are a special and extremely bonded bunch. And to our teachers for your never-ending support and guidance, to our families for always being there for us, and lastly, the School for allowing us to dream.

Here's a message to my juniors and whoever's listening: be brave, dare to dream, but don't be afraid to fail and when you do, you'll realise how far you've come. We came here as blank canvasses, and along the way we have added our own unique form, shape and colour. We are all works in progress, our journey continues...

Thank you.