

You can do anything!

As a young nervous military recruit, I had been armed with a 7.62mm self loading rifle and ordered to occupy a trench, along with two other steely eyed killers. On a cold December morning, we were boldly defending the unsuspecting Lincolnshire country folk from imminent attack either from Russian Special Forces or non-existent terrorist. At any moment we could have been bombed, shot, gassed, nuked or ridiculed, and so we remained hyper vigilant.

It was freezing. Our uniforms were soaking wet after crawling through icy mud, we hadn't eaten for hours, and many of us were on the brink of giving up. And then, beyond all imagining – the most perfect news. A massive urn with hot tea. In those conditions, it was the best mug of sugar-filled liquid delight I had ever tasted. We got back to the trench, allowing the tea to warm our hands, and took a sip. At that very moment, a loud bang thundered from the nearby treeline followed by the squawk of birds as they fled. And then... silence.

After a few seconds a pink cloud floated across the open field towards us. A mock gas attack. And if we were going to pass this exercise, we had to throw the tea away, put our respirators on, blow out hard and shout, "Gas! Gas! Gas!" But – some of the guys were so tired, appreciated that mug of tea so much, that they just looked at the pink cloud, shook their heads, accepted that they had failed, and carried on with their tea. Because in that moment, that objectively horrible cup of tea was worth more to them than a military career!

The worst of it was, fifteen minutes later, we were all sat down to a hot meal anyway.

Well, at the moment – I am seeing this up close with my son who's training in the army. And one of the repeated phrases, still used today as it was in my day, is that when you are exhausted, and you don't think you can keep this pace, and that there is no end in sight, and that the multiverse is geared against you, the resounding shout is "Your body is lying to you."

The point is clearly that human beings are often capable of doing way more than they thought themselves capable of. The ability to keep going, when your body is screaming at you to stop. The point that we can do way more than we might think we can do!

But that is quite a long way from the pop memes –

'you can do anything' / Make the impossible, possible / break out of your comfort zone/ You are your only limit / you got this!

The whole 'You can do anything'! Seems like a bit of an exaggeration. You can't do anything. You can't eat your own head. Not even God can do everything! can he

build a rock so big even he cannot move it? And no, omnipotence is an imperial title, not a divine attribute. Omnipotence means that you have power over everyone!

But we can do way more than we might imagine. And one of the conversations I've been having with my hitherto unwittingly lazy male descendant, is that he has learned in his basic training in the military – that human beings can deal with way, way more than he thought possible.

Now, I am not suggesting that you should all go and join the army so you can feel what real stress is! But instead, to say, students here have got into one of the best universities in multiverse – and that brings a toughness of its own. Everyone here has done outrageously well to get into this University. The reason that a Cambridge degree is worth so much, is that you also have to perform while you're here – and you are here because this College believes you are more than capable of dealing with the toughness that you are facing, especially this term.

Is stress always bad? And is exam stress a bad thing? Part of the reason that we do exams, that we do tests, is that we need to know what we can cope with – what are our limits? And of course, many finalists this year are facing unique pressures, after the experiences they have had following all the covid disruptions to their education.

So the first step with dealing with the stress is knowing as much as you can about yourself and how you relate to others. So

I have rarely heard any student say, 'Yes, I have done enough preparation for this exam. I could not be any better prepared than I am right now.' In fact, I would probably start to worry about anyone who said that.

Then you have students reporting that they feel they have done less work than everyone else. It is one of the worst measures – because some students slave away for 10 hours a day, and pretend not to be working that hard because they want everyone to believe they achieve good results effortlessly. Then you have students who pretend they have done much more work than they actually have – given all the distractions.

Then you have some people who can use five or six hours a day, brilliantly! And others who can work for 10 hours a day and then feel it's not enough.

And you have students who work insanely long hours, and then think – none of it has sunk in! I can't remember anything – but, once you get into an exam, they discover that all the information is there because it comes out as you start writing in narrative format.

Everyone faces exam stress differently. Feels it differently. And it's tough. And it's meant to be tough. And exams are meant to be stressful.

But not stressful beyond what you can bear. And this is not because 'I can do anything!' And no, you can't leap on the Christianised version of the meme that we heard in today's reading, "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

The point of that claim on the lips of Saint Paul, is that there is something else at work inside him – that enables him to deal with all that he has to face. The church, the whole body of Christ, is made not simply of its own members, but of the Holy Spirit that animates that communal togetherness. In the military, similarly, a unit is described as a body, a corps, built on bonds of togetherness called Camaraderie. And a College –

As a member of a College, you are not facing any of the stresses of university life, on your own. Yes, there are support networks, and yes, you will have to find ways of making those support networks work for your particular personality, and context. Yes it is ultimately you that faces the stresses this place awakens in you, you an individual that faces down anxieties, and stresses, and deadlines and exams.

But as students, you are here because you deserve to be here, because some people who know what they are doing, know that you are good enough to be here, that you can cope with the stresses of this place, and because – as I have seen over and over again since I've been here – people from every department in this place want you to do as well as you can do.