"Do you have a plan, Michael?" This was my uncle talking to me about 30 years ago. “You must have a plan”. This uncle was a former Cambridge rowing Blue and successful businessman, and was determined and ambitious. He certainly had a plan; his was, I came to see, to seek out ever higher peaks to climb. But I also realised that he did not spend any time admiring the view, or take time to reflect on the balance between his work and family life. Shortly after our conversation he suffered a major stroke, had to stop work, became hugely frustrated and spent the rest of his life trying to climb the little hills that were all he could now manage. It is sad to reflect that all his planning and ambition did not help him find contentment or a sense of having lived well.

My uncle’s advice – and what happened to him later– have often caused me to reflect one how little the course of a life can be predicted, and to consider what is really important in making a success of it; and indeed, what success really means.

When he insisted that I have a plan he meant that I must lift my head up and develop some long term goals. This was hard advice to follow at the time. I was a young lecturer, with money worries and a child with a chronic medical condition. I did try to do what he wanted, but soon realized that my ambitions and my measures of success were of a very different kind.

So what sort of plan, if any, should we have? My uncle always had his eye on the far distance; but I have found it best to focus on the near horizon. It is clear that what is right for a permanent institution like King’s may well be different from what is best for individuals. The College continues indefinitely, and so a long term view of its development is highly desirable, in fact essential. But for mortals, while such hyperopia may lead to more ‘success’ in conventional terms, it does not necessarily lead to a good life well lived, and in my view, as an agnostic who has no faith in existence after death, it is ultimately futile. The title of this address is taken from Gray’s ‘Elegy written in a country churchyard’, which I was made to learn by heart at school. The poem is mostly a meditation on the lives of the village folk buried in the churchyard, but it contains the stanza at the head of this address.
Job had something not dissimilar to say:

For there is hope of a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again, and that the tender branch thereof will not cease... But man dieth, and wasteth away: yea, man giveth up the ghost, and where is he? ... One dieth in his full strength, being wholly at ease and quiet... And another dieth in the bitterness of his soul, and never eateth with pleasure. They shall lie down alike in the dust, and the worms shall cover them.

It can be argued that even though life ends there is a point in achieving fame and power in that our works may live on – the ‘legacy’ argument so beloved of politicians. I think it is a legitimate aim to try to ‘make a difference’. But in fact, oxymoronically, ‘immortality is not forever’. Only a few truly exceptional lives, by no means all of them in any way good, have a legacy that survives dilution by succeeding generations. Remember Ozymandias in Shelley’s great poem: on a ruined statue in the desert appears the inscription:

My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair! Nothing beside remains. Round the decay Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare, The lone and level sands stretch far away.

Our Hall is full of portraits of members of the College, intended no doubt by them as permanent memorials. But of all these paintings, perhaps only a couple; Horace Walpole, 18th century man of letters, and M.R.James, former Provost and writer of ghost stories, mean much to us today. For almost all of us, one’s presence in the world at large will not long survive the funeral or memorial service. So I think that to validate my existence, however successful I think I am or might become, or whatever I might be remembered for when I am gone, I should not rely on any hope of making any long term contribution to the world, but try to make a worthwhile difference in the present.

Alan Bennett had something to say about life in his unforgettable ‘Take a Pew’ sketch from Beyond the Fringe, first performed over 50 years ago, which takes the form of a sermon. Part of it reads

Life, you know, is rather like opening a tin of sardines. We all of us are looking for the key. And I wonder how many of you here tonight have wasted years of your lives looking behind the kitchen dressers of this life for that key. I know I have. Others think they’ve found the key, don’t they? They roll back the lid of the sardine tin of life. They reveal the sardines,... they get them out, and they enjoy them. But, you know, there’s always a little bit in the corner you can’t get out.
Do I have a key? Or indeed know where to look for one? Actually I do not. Nor did I ever have a ‘plan’ that included a position like the one in which I now find myself. In my case, contrary to my uncle’s hopes, my ambitions were always short range, not going beyond trying for the next most obvious role. In fact, as all we mathematicians know, forecasting the future, like extrapolation of a curve, works best when small steps are taken.

I never, for example, had any ambition to be Head of a College, until my time as the Vice-Master of Trinity made it clear to me that I had the skills that could be brought to bear on my present position. Similarly my decision to be considered for the Vice-Mastership came after a period of serious illness, during which I had time to reflect that I could do the job, and that it would be all too easy just to carry on to retirement without trying something new. That other trap, of too little ambition, is expressed so well in Sir Francis Drake’s famous prayer:

**Disturb us, Lord, when we are too well pleased with ourselves, when our dreams have come true because we have dreamed too little, when we arrived safely because we sailed too close to the shore.**

And how is one to have a life well lived in a job like mine? St Paul has much that is correct to say about good conduct, but in my view he left quite a bit out. While I intensely dislike conflict, you cannot please all of the people all of the time; on occasion difficult decisions have to be taken, and we can only strive for honesty and transparency. I also try to listen to my colleagues, and let them know that their talents are appreciated. Together with these principles of openness, straightforwardness and looking for the best in people, I should add the importance of reflecting on both successes and failures, and using the past as instruction for the future. An appreciation of one’s failings, and learning from them is essential. I was once on a selection board for a professorship. One candidate went on and on about his achievements and skills. Eventually I asked him if there was anything that he felt he did not do well. He was unable to think of anything; and unsurprisingly was not appointed.

How can we know whether we have been successful? This can be tricky in a position with status. I have relied on the views of a few trusted people. But I can learn most about my leadership by seeing how my judgment is trusted to carry through the College’s aims, arrived at through agreement. While it is gratifying to triumph in the face of opposition it is much more satisfying to me to achieve consensus.
I am not complacent; my life has had plenty of false turns and disappointments, and even the closest stretch of the road ahead may have unseen obstacles. But by reflecting on past difficulties I am both pleased to have overcome them in a morally satisfying way, and better prepared for what lies ahead. So I hope that even my uncle would have agreed that I have found a plan that works for me.