

The offer: to be harbingers of hopelessness or prophetic poets of what could be

Acknowledgements

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Members of University Council
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Families and friends of the graduands.

I acknowledge that we are meeting on Kurna land, and also want to acknowledge the rich diversity of Nunga, Anangu, Koori and Torres Strait cultures of this land before the first arrivals of other cultures from overseas.

My congratulations to all those who are graduating today. As you graduate today I hope you feel the experience of your course has served you well to meet your expectations of the future. However, and perhaps this sounds somewhat paradoxical, I hope that your expectations may be filled more than you expect. I invite you all to leave yourselves open to expect the unexpected in life – that you will feel that the options that lay before you are more than they were before and that these options have the capacity to lead you to new places and circumstances that you might never have foreseen when you started this most recent course of study.

I hope that years from now, as you look back upon what you will have achieved by that future time, that you will find yourself saying not just that it was good (good's okay, but hardly good enough), but that it was great.

Great for you – and that too will be good, but not good enough.

The German film producer Werner Herzog, talking about his 2001 movie, *Invincible*, based on a true story of the cruelties of clashing civilizations in the 1930s, said:

The century that we are going to live now will be the century of solitudes. It's not isolation. It's solitudes.

I certainly hope he is wrong; that the implied cultural sadness of these solitudes will not be our future. But in this context wan hope is not sufficient; it would be vain. As we live in a global context rife with those who would drive us to separations of solitude and our own post-modern egoism ('its all about me'), we each need an intentional personal agenda of engagement.

So to return to the words 'good' and 'great' as descriptors that you might use about what you will have done years from now, may I suggest that 'great' will

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only be applicable if yours will have been a life of engagement – where you will have served others as much as taken benefit from what you have achieved.

As you leave today, parchment in hand, you leave empowered with new options ahead. But as you do so, spare a thought for those for whom the one chance at life each of us has, was a chance benighted by a litany of dead-end options. For that is the fate that befalls many in our world today. They live lives - this one and only chance at life in this world - facing what seem to be options that only ever arrive at dead-ends. If such people ever, in the midst of their daily grind to survive to the next day, have the time to name their future, it could well be that they would name it 'hopeless'.

Who could blame them for such an assessment? But what would you name their future?

Recently, in our media, we had paraded before us the private tragedies of two families in suburban Adelaide. The public was titillated by the lurid reporting of two cases of complete breakdown in family functioning; you will recall that some of the children had to be hospitalised as they were suffering from severe malnutrition and all had to be taken into care. In the wake of the extensive reporting, you could almost hear the wave of 'tut tutting' from the comfortable homes of Adelaide.

Discussing the story at a function some days later with a very nice person I know, a person who helps others through his service club and who would, like each of us, characterise himself as 'a good person', I was struck by his simplistic conclusion about the future facing the children of these families – 'those children can't have any hope' he said.

In other words, he had named their future as 'hopeless'.

I was appalled – I objected that such a name could ever be given to anyone's future. But later, upon reflection, the state of my pall grew much deeper, for I was forced to consider the question: 'If that upset me, what actual evidence do I have that there can be real hope for such children? And what can I do to contribute to such evidence becoming a reality?'

In other words, if I believe, and I do, that 'hopelessness is a fallacy', then what evidence can I mount to support that belief?

The Russian poet, Yevgeny Baratynsky [1800-1844], wrote:

Providence has given human wisdom the choice between two fates: either hope and agitation, or hopelessness and calm.

Calmly my dinner conversationalist had spoken of hopelessness; in response I had felt the screaming need to declare hope lives. But comfort and calm are seldom enough to do this; agitation is often needed. And agitation needs agitators.

So the need is to break free from the vortex of hopelessness that sucks in not only those whose lives seem confronted by dead-end options, but also those who comfortably accept the blessings of their lives for themselves whilst endorsing the hopelessness of the future of others.

How can we break free?

Might I suggest by becoming a prophetic poet. I could have said, by becoming a dreamer of what could be; but I am actually inviting you to do more than just dream about what could be, and asking you to consider what should be. And what role you can play to be an agitator for the 'should be'.

Of course in using the term 'poet' in this context, I am going beyond the definition of a poet as a craftsperson of verse, and take guidance from Robert Browning's contention that 'God is the perfect poet'. In that vein, I am moved by the words of John Keats, from the last poem he would ever write:

The poet and the dreamer are distinct,
Diverse, sheer opposite, antipodes.
The one pours out a balm upon the world,
The other vexes it.

In this sense, the dreamer is an idealist who sedates the pain of humanity by pouring a balm of visions of a better world but without any sense of how we might reach such a place – the 'could be' rather than the 'should be'.

John Keats' sense of the poet – one who vexes the world – has the prophetic sense about it, of a forth-telling not just a foretelling ... forth-telling the world as it should be contrasting it with the flawed construction of our current order.

In our comfort zones, where we might well dream of better worlds for all, the trap is that essentially we often simply accept the broken-ness of the world around us as a given, or at least something beyond our own individual capacity to address. And by so doing, we become as much a part of the problem as any external causes we might blame.

The Greek-Egyptian poet CP Cavafy [1863-1933], in his poem "The Barbarians are coming", wrote:

Why this sudden bewilderment, this confusion?
(How serious people's faces have become).

Why are the streets and squares emptying so rapidly,
everyone going home lost in thought?
Because night has fallen
and the barbarians haven't come.
And some of our men just in from the border say
There are no barbarians any longer.
Now what's going to happen to us without barbarians?
Those people were a kind of solution.

What Cavafy alluded to was the horrible thought that we ourselves might be the very barbarians we declaim against. Ursula LeGuin, in her extremely discomforting story, *The Ones who walk away from Omelas*, wrote of a society not totally dissimilar to ours and said of its citizens:

They were not barbarians. I do not know the rules and laws of their society, but I suspect that they were singularly few. As they did without monarchy and slavery, so they also got on without the stock exchange, the advertisement, the secret police, and the bomb ... They were not naïve and happy children – though their children were in fact happy. They were mature, intelligent, passionate adults whose lives were not wretched.

But the crunch of the story came when she wrote “let me describe one more thing”. With this simple request to the reader, she introduced a chilling section that described by the metaphor of a single suffering child, the foundation of the world's pain upon which the contentment of the good citizens of Omelas was built:

They all know it is there, all the people of Omelas. Some of them have come to see it, others are content merely to know it is there. They all know that it has to be there. Some of them understand why, and some do not, but they all understand that their happiness, the beauty of their city, the tenderness of their friendships, the health of their children, the wisdom of their scholars, the skill of their makers, even the abundance of their harvest and the kindly weathers of their skies, depend wholly on this child's abominable misery.

Where does that leave each of us, living as we do in a world where many endure lives of oppression and injustice and where there are many systemic perpetrators of such oppression and injustice?

You are soon to be graduates of a fine university, the University of South Australia. During my time in Cabinet, I was pleased to be a part, first of the amalgamation of various institutions into the former South Australian College of Advanced Education and later its transformation into UniSA by amalgamating with the former South Australian Institute of Technology. As South Australians we can be proud of the way UniSA has fulfilled its charter. I note that its Mission says:

UniSA educates professionals and citizens to the highest standards; creates and disseminates knowledge; and engages with our communities to address the major issues of our time.

Today, I am focusing on the challenges to you, as imminent graduates, about whether you will choose to 'address the major issues of our time'. In 2006, in an address to the Chief Executives Conference of the Association of Commonwealth Universities, held here in Adelaide, I quoted Professor M W Makgoba, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, giving his definition of the role of his university:

... (it is) an institution that will play a transformational role in the development of South Africa, but also make a meaningful contribution to global knowledge.

I further quoted him in reference to the 'community of scholars' that makes up a university (staff and students):

(Is the) community of scholars ... effectively helping to address the pressing issues of our time? ... Are we pursuing truth with a purpose and a sense of social responsibility? And importantly, are we being courageous enough in the pursuit of this truth?

Professor Makgoba's comments are relevant to all universities and their staff and student bodies. We should ask ourselves the questions 'how is our scholarship contributing effectively' and 'are we pursuing truth with a purpose and a sense of social responsibility'.

The well known story of the Good Samaritan compares the response of three people to the plight a victim of the world's broken-ness. As you know two passed by, keeping to their own business; but the third stopped and saw the stopping as much a part of his business as that which he had set out to do at the start of that day. He met the unexpected and made it part of his fulfilling his expectations.

I close as I opened, conveying to all the graduands here today my very best wishes for the future – may it be great, not just for you but for others, those whom you may meet but also those whom you may never know. For it to be great I invite you not to be a harbinger of hopelessness but to be prophetic poets of how the world could look and be vexatious in helping it come to pass.

The choice is yours.