

Graduation Address by Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott

It is a deep honour to be invited to speak to you on this special occasion. I acknowledge that we gather on the lands of the Kurna People and I respect their elders past and present, and the spirits of this land.

A graduation ceremony is a celebration for you, your families and your community. It is also a celebration of the fulfillment of this University's mission in:

- Educating professionals
- Creating and applying knowledge
- Serving our communities

Your degree or your diploma is a testament to your professional education, and for those of you who have undertaken research, it is a testament to the creation of knowledge which hopefully you and others will apply.

A graduation ceremony heralds the promise of you serving the community, and this is what I wish to reflect upon today.

Professional knowledge and skills must be built on a foundation of strong values, just like the walls and roof of a house must be built upon solid foundations. It is our values which determine whether our knowledge and skills will serve the community, or just serve ourselves.

If they are to be embedded in our society, values such as integrity and respect need to be nurtured within families, communities and educational institutions, from kindergarten to universities. And for us to want to absorb such values, we need to identify with, and have a sense of belonging to those who teach them.

In a society which tends to place the individual and not the community at the centre of things, this sense of belonging is sometimes weakened. It has been said that each of us must address three core questions in life:

- Who am I?
- Where am I going?
- Do I matter?

But these are very individualistic questions. Many years ago I came across an Aboriginal service for people with an alcohol problem which asked the people entering their treatment program to address two other questions before asking themselves "Who am I?". These two questions were "where do I come from?" and "who do I belong to?"

This is the profound wisdom of the oldest living civilization on earth, as these are the questions which connect us to community. By answering these questions we can see and feel ourselves as part of something bigger than ourselves. Most of us have a deep desire to do this as it is from being part of something bigger than ourselves that we derive meaning in our lives.

A profession or a discipline can also be one way in which we are part of something bigger than ourselves. For many of you graduating today, this ceremony is a rite of passage into a profession or discipline. For those of you who have been working for some time, this ceremony marks another milestone in your professional journey of learning.

You are links in an inter-generational chain of your profession or discipline. It is important to be proud of that heritage. That does not mean being uncritical. Nor does it mean that we become so wedded to our particular professional or disciplinary identity that it becomes like a tribal identity based on boundaries that can lock out other perspectives.

The reality is that many of the issues with which you, as graduates of health sciences, behavioural sciences and social sciences, will grapple in your professional life, cannot be understood by looking through only one disciplinary lens. Some of the most challenging problems facing us require approaches which draw on the interaction of biological, psychological and social perspectives.

There can be a creative intellectual conflict between these perspectives and we need to welcome this in a spirit of genuine collaboration.

As a young social worker in a mental health clinic in a women's and children's hospital in the 1970s, I found that an inter-disciplinary perspective was of immeasurable value to me as I struggled, as did my colleagues, to understand and respond to complex and emerging problems such as post-natal depression, eating disorders, and child sexual assault. These were problems for which neither I nor my colleagues, who included psychologists, psychiatrists and mental health nurses, had been trained.

But we found that we each had different conceptual tools to offer. One of mine as a social worker was "going from case to cause" – tackling the underlying causes of the problem which one could see operating at an individual level. For example, in relation to child sexual assault, this meant advocating for reform of the law relating to child witnesses, and changing community attitudes to a problem that people did not want to see.

I am sure that you too will confront problems for which you have not, and could not, have been prepared, for we do not know the challenges ahead. I trust that your ability to question prevailing orthodoxies, to use the conceptual tools you have been given, and your willingness to go from case to cause, will enable you to rise to such challenges.

But let us always remember that knowing does not reside only in professional knowledge. A generation ago it was almost unthinkable that someone who suffered from a mental illness or someone who had experienced child abuse had anything to teach professionals. Now we see that we can only understand such problems with humility and compassion if we hear and heed the subjective experience of those who have suffered.

So let us add the virtues of humility and compassion to the values of integrity and respect. I hope that you will work where these virtues and values are nurtured within you, and that in turn you will nurture them within others. That is how we shall serve our communities, now and in the future.