

Your graduation today is a milestone in your and your family's life. My warmest congratulations to you all.

Many of you have worked hard for several years, holding down jobs, some raising families in the endless juggling act that is modern life today. Many have your proud families here.

My parents were English migrants who both left school at 15, worked hard in a trade and dreamed of their children doing what you have all now done. Tonight when you all celebrate, make sure you all look your parents and families straight in the eye and thank them for the love and sacrifices they have made to get you to where you are today.

But also remember this. It can be really hard for parents on graduation day too. They come here as parents, and they leave as contemporaries. After 22 years of child-raising, they are suddenly unemployed.

You have all been enormously privileged to have been born in or come to Australia where a good education is accessible to almost all. Some of you will see your education just as a stepping stone to a career and material security. But today I'd like to also suggest that the privileges that your education will bring should inspire you make room in your lives to try and give something back to society.

Nelson Mandela said that "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." You have all made wonderful progress in your lifelong education. How will each of you try to change the world to make it a better place?

I have spent my career in public health. That's the part of the health system which is about trying to prevent problems from happening. Let me tell you a story I give my students each year. A mother and her son are walking on a beach and see thousands of fish being washed up on the shoreline. The fish flap helplessly on the sand, many already dead. The mother begins to throw fish back into the water, saving their lives. The boy asks her what the point is of saving a few when inevitably hundreds or thousands more will immediately take their place. The mother replies that while this is true, that each fish she saves will be in no doubt that being helped to live was a good thing.

I tell this story to as a way of helping people to understand that personal acts of generosity and helpfulness can make important differences to others. This is undoubtedly true. Civilised societies always value individuals and rescuing individuals is nearly always virtuous.

But the problem is that while such small numbers of "fish" are being thrown back in the sea for a second chance, thousands more are being washed ashore.

Public health has found many ways of greatly reducing such problems before they start. In two fields I have worked in – tobacco control and gun control, we are the envy of the world.

Thanks to gun law reform after the Port Arthur massacre in 1996, Australia is one of the safest nations on earth. The USA has 14 times Australia's population; 141 times our total firearm-caused deaths and 238 times Australia's firearm homicide deaths. We have not had a mass shooting in 14 years. In the 10 years before Port Arthur, we had 15.

With smoking, you have to travel back to 1962 to see lung cancer rates as low as they are today. Thanks to advocates successfully arguing for advertising bans, tax rises, smokefree public spaces and I hope plain packaging of tobacco products, the next generation of Australians might be the first in 100 years to live full lives not blighted by totally preventable tobacco caused disease.

The David and Goliath story tells of how single strategically thinking individuals with right on their side can defeat powerful Goliath-like forces. That's how it happens occasionally. But far more often another metaphor from the French essayist Voltaire is more accurate. He talked about problems being overturned by being "pecked to death by ducks". A single peck from a duck can be annoying. But a storm of pecks from an army of ducks can distract and weaken powerful forces.

I served for 20 years on the board of Choice magazine. Choice is dedicated to providing information to help consumers make good choices. But it is also an organisation dedicated to trying to stop thousands of fish being washed on shore by advocating for consumer protection, laws that ban shonky goods and which put consumer interests in the forefront of policies. Early in my time with Choice I went to hear the famous American consumer advocate Ralph Nader talk at Sydney Town Hall. He finished his speech, as I now finish mine, by urging everyone to make room in their busy lives to do what he called their "citizen's duty".

By this he meant much more than just voting once every few years, or contributing productively to the economy. He meant that we should all make some room in our lives -- maybe just once a month -- to become change agent "ducks" and do things like join community organisations dedicated to promoting civil society, human rights, consumer protection, anti-discrimination, reducing inequities to speak out publicly about issues of injustice and exploitation, to urge the reform of laws. He meant we should write letters to newspapers and blogs; call up radio programs to express our concerns about current events; and join organisations working for change.

So, go out into the world determined to make your contribution to making our world a better, fairer place. Your family, your University and Australia will be even more proud of you.