

Speech to Graduating Students

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First of all, let me confess that I have never done this before, that is, I have never given a graduation speech before. Moreover, I stepped off a plane from South America last night, so if I fall asleep sometime during the next ten minutes you'll know it is just yesterday catching up with me today. Hopefully if I do fall asleep you won't notice.

Never having done this before I have been wondering just what I ought to do. Now it seems to me that here there is one obvious and very simple course of action that has to be followed first: and that is to congratulate all of those of you graduating today. After all, you are the reason we are here, indeed you are the reason you are here as well. You should all feel proud of what you have achieved.

It is easy to forget how much work stands behind the awarding of a degree. Whether it is an undergraduate degree, Honours, a postgraduate award or even a diploma, the piece of paper you receive doesn't provide any account of the long hours, the struggling with difficult texts and problems, the frustrations or the pleasures that have gone into it. It is worth keeping that in mind when you look at the document that records your achievement. What it really means is a great deal of effort and commitment that is easily overlooked – certainly it is easy to overlook for those who haven't done it.

The speech I have been asked to give this afternoon is not, of course, the only such speech being given today. But the graduations that are taking place this week, and the speeches that accompany them, will be the last such graduations and speeches in this University for the century. So I suppose the speeches really ought to be something special. My problem, however, is that I am not at all sure, as I said before, what a graduation speech ought to do

– apart, that is, from the all-important task of congratulating all of you and taking note of your achievement.

Now if I hadn't been off in Latin America I could probably have listened to the other graduation speeches that preceded this one and learnt from them. And although I was present in Chile for the Presidential elections on Sunday, political speeches in Spanish were not a lot of help for me. I am left, then, to reflect on other graduation speeches I have heard.

It seems to me that one of the useful strategies that people employ here is to reflect on their own days as a student and their own graduation. Here it seems to me especially helpful if some of the people with whom you were at university have later gone on to become famous. In my case, however, this is no help at all. No one who I knew at University seems to have gone on to make any special mark on the public consciousness (most of us don't) – at least not so far as I know – certainly if they have they have done a good job of keeping it a secret. Moreover my own graduation, at least the last one I attended which was back in about 1980, also doesn't provide me with much help in deciding on what I might say here. Since to be honest, I cannot actually remember anything that was said in the speech that day – in fact I cannot even recall whether there was a speech. I know I attended the ceremony, but I recall very little about it. Of course it was an important day, and I do remember certain things from it, mostly to do with my family and with parading through the streets of the city, but what is important about the day is usually not the speeches, but what the day represents for oneself. What is important are the personal aspects of the day, rather than the speeches delivered at everyone and so it is not unsurprising that people seldom recall what was said on such occasions.

One thing I would say about my own days as a student is that I do think I was very lucky to have been at university when I was. I went through a system in which fees were almost non-existent and in which, more importantly perhaps, there was still minimal interference in university activities on the part of governments; it was also a system in which the sort of broad skills-based education that Humanities study offers was accorded a much more

central role and in which there was greater support, in real terms, for the sort of historical, philosophical and cultural reflection that is essential to a creative and healthy society.

But I still have my problem. What does one say in a graduation speech? Having found no help in reflecting on speeches I have heard myself, it seemed worth reflecting on whether there were any memorable or famous such speeches from elsewhere. Of course there are some memorable such speeches. The only problem is I cannot remember any myself – well, that is not entirely true. There is one such speech that I know of - memorable mainly, I think, because someone remembered it long enough for it to get published in the *New Yorker*. The speech is Woody Allen's "Speech to the Graduates" – which I think was supposed to have been given at Harvard. Now this is indeed a memorable speech, full of uplifting moral tone and sage advice. Allen begins with some great lines – lines that have a special relevance today no less than in the 1970's: "More than any other time in history" he says "mankind stands at a crossroads. One path leads to despair and utter hopelessness. The other to total extinction. Let us pray we have the wisdom to choose correctly." Great beginning, but the problem with the rest of the speech is that it seems to me that one really has to have spent about 45 years in therapy in order to deliver it convincingly. And since I have neither the bank balance nor the time (quite apart from the fact that Hobart lacks something of the appropriate New York ambience for that to work anyway) I think I will leave the neurotic Jewish intellectual lines to Allen.

Of course Allen's speech does indicate something that one might think is important about graduation speeches: that they have some sort of impact. And Allen always seems to me to have that, namely impact, though not always the impact that you expect. And one way to have impact is, as Allen does, to go for some sort of diagnosis of the zeitgeist and, if possible, spectacular predictions of our immediate futures.

Now predicting what the future holds is certainly a popular path to take, but it also seems a dangerous path – especially at this particular point in time. It seems that one can't turn on the television or open a newspaper or magazine right now without someone wanting to tell us what the current century has been like and what the next century, and the next

millennium will bring. Not only is everyone into the prediction business right now, but it seems to me that the prediction business is itself a predictably bad business to get involved in – and there is a simple reason for this.

For a start people are usually only interested in the bad news. Imagine if Nostradamus hadn't predicted fire and famine and the end of the world – if he focussed instead on good things like the eradication of smallpox, the prosperity of the 1970's, Australia becoming world champions at just about everything, the invention of the espresso machine – I bet we would not have heard anything more about him. Certainly no one would be bothering to try and decipher all those coded lines.

The thing is, if you offer predictions of good times ahead then it is highly likely that (a) no one will believe you (b) no one will be interested in you and (c) you will get a reputation as an unrealistic and rather boring optimist. The alternative is to go for the much more saleable *bad* predictions – hopelessness, extinction and the impossibility of getting a EFTPOS machine to work on January 1st – then either you get them wrong, in which case you have every reason to be depressed at your own inability to understand what goes on in the world, or you get them right, in which case depression will be the order of the day all round. Either way, you lose.

So prediction seems a predictably bad business to be in – as if we didn't already have more than enough of it at the moment anyway. But one doesn't have to talk about what will happen, one can just focus on how bad things are now (once again, people usually aren't so interested in how good things are). The trouble with this approach is that it seems to me just too easy. And this is because, when it comes right down to it, one of the things you can predict is that we will get things wrong, so it isn't surprising that things are as bad as they are. In fact, what surprises me sometimes is that they aren't worse than they are. Certainly after ten years of university “reform”, the amazing thing is that we still have graduation ceremonies at which people like me can worry about what to say in a graduation speech.

So where does that leave my dilemma? What on earth does one say to a group of new graduates and diplomats? Well, since my own experience suggests that, no matter what I say, most of you will not remember it – you will remember the more important things like how you couldn't get the hood to stay on properly in the photo afterwards. In that case, maybe I should cut my losses and let you all get on with the really important things like getting those photographs done and getting off to graduation lunches.

There is one other strategy that one can employ in these situations, however – probably the tried and true method is to try to give some sound advice to you all, preferably based on one's own experience, about life after university. This has one important advantage: it reminds all of us that there is indeed life after graduation. Sometimes this can seem doubtful (indeed sometime it can seem as if it is doubtful whether there is life before graduation either). This approach does have one big disadvantage, at least inasmuch as it involves offering advice. The problem is this: the one most important piece of advice to keep in mind is that people will almost never follow advice they get for free. If you want someone to take your advice you need to sell it to them and at a fairly high cost. This seems to be wonderfully illustrated by my own experience as a parent. I can offer vast quantities of completely free advice in which my boys seem to have no interest at all. Now there is an important lesson there if we can only find it, though what we should charge for it is another matter entirely.

In conclusion then let me quote once again from Mr Allen's own concluding advice to the graduates at Harvard: "It is clear the future holds great opportunities. It also holds pitfalls. The trick will be to avoid the pitfalls, seize the opportunities and get back home by six-o'clock ". Since I anticipate that many of you will be spending this afternoon and this evening in well-deserved celebration, getting home by six-o'clock may not be quite so important. But let me say once again, congratulations on your achievements – don't forget the work that went into them – and remember, don't trust predictions about the future, be wary of pessimists about the present and if you give advice, make sure you charge a decent fee.