Libby Gleeson AM

Speech at graduation for Education and Social Work alumni
15 April 2011, The Great Hall, University of Sydney

It is a pleasure to be with you on such a day of celebration.

In speaking today I want to make reference to a woman probably about the same age as you. In 1978 this young Australian Woman, a member of the Ananda Marga religious sect burned herself alive in the main square in Geneva. I never knew of her in life but I know of her in death because of a poem.

That poem is in this collection Beauty is the Straw by the Australian writer Amy Witting, better known as a novelist, who had taught the young woman French and German at high school.

The poem is called, A Letter to Lynette. From my reading of the poem, Amy struggled to understand why her old student did what she did in the same way, years before, she had argued with her about her ideas and convictions.

She says:

... these are the arguments I would use,
against you, which is pointless to repeat.

You are beyond their reach, as you always were,
No matter how I would argue and protest,
Saying, ‘Discover, defend the self, for you are
What you do, what you love, what you know.’ My words were lost.
I could not summon you out of your despair,
Not your bleak union with the dispossessed.

Amy Whiting, from A Letter to Lynette, in Beauty is the Straw, Angus and Robertson, 1991, p90.

You are what you do, what you love, what you know.

Let’s take them one at a time.

You are what you do.

Forget the old line: You are what you eat. You must already know that in this society we are all defined very much by our jobs. Parties, meetings, chance encounters – the standard opening question is ‘What do you do?’
Jobs are important. They fill up many of your waking hours. They often determine who your friends are – inevitably you socialise with those you work with. Teachers often marry teachers.

By choosing the courses in which you are graduating you have chosen careers, and the odds are that money and status did not direct the decision. Good. As motivation that doesn’t always last. What's needed is that which satisfies a deeper part of yourself.

And I hope the jobs you enter do that. But if they don’t, don’t be afraid of change. I know very few people who are still, at my age, doing what they thought they would be doing when they left this place. The world is changing and you will grow and change too.

What you do is more than your job. Important though jobs are, they are not your whole life. Defy the economic system and the Government that would have you work incessantly at the expense of other parts of your personality and life interests. A society is more than an economic system. It is a community – people living and working together, people of all ages, interests and abilities. All of us have to contribute to that society in whatever ways we can.

Some of you may be the political animals that run for Parliament or for local government. Some may take up a cause and fight for it with whatever energy you have. We need people who go out on a limb for the environment, for social justice, for international organisations. Or more locally those who work behind the scenes in their professional associations, or in local institutions like the board of the tennis club, little athletics or the P&C.

Some of these roles give kudos and status. Others are quieter and the contribution is only fully recognised when that person departs and the gap they leave is acknowledged.

*What you love.*

Note here that Amy doesn’t say ‘*Who you love*’.

For I think that here, she isn’t talking about lasting intimate relationships.

For me, this line is a follow on from my last comments. Where do you put your energy and your passion?

The young subject of Amy’s poem died for love and brotherhood. Her passionate young energy chose that path and felt that her self-destruction would alert the world to that cause. Like Amy, I fear it was a few seconds grab on television news.

I urge you to put your passion to more practical ends. It might be the creative outlets of writing, of music, drama, film, poetry or forms of multi media. It might
be causes that desperately need the energy of new-inspired recruits. It is no coincidence that so much can be achieved in your twenties before the weighing down of career and children, mortgages and cynicism.

Where you decide to put that energy may define you as closely as the job you embark on. It may become more important than career. It may lead on to all kinds of possibilities.

*What you learn.*

This is the third of Amy’s statements and I take it to mean learn and learn and learn. Don’t ever stop. Discover your interests and pursue them.

Perhaps you are feeling, as I did, thirty-eight years ago when I left this place and swore that I would never again do another exam. But learning of the kind you have now finished is only one mode of learning.

Question.

Read.

Listen.

Seek out the truth.

This world needs sophisticated, highly educated citizens. The children that many of you are going out to teach may well be inheriting a global situation of massive crisis. I’m talking here of the changes wrought by global warming which will force us to question every aspect of the way have lived and continue to live in this and many other countries. Beware of fundamentalist solutions. Continue to educate yourself to learn and to understand what is happening around you.

To return to the poem for a moment:

*You are beyond their reach, as you always were,*
No matter how I would argue and protest,
Saying, ‘Discover, defend the self, for you are
What you do, what you love, what you know,’
Discover, defend the self.

During your years in this place you will have formed many of the ideas and the beliefs that will be with you throughout your lives. Continue that process of discovery. Revel in your mind, your ideas and your feelings. Resist the herd. Know thyself.

I wish you well in whatever field you find yourselves in the years to come.