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GRADUATION ADDRESS – UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
“Exult in the Greatness of Others”

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Chancellor, Distinguished guests, today’s graduates, Ladies and
Gentlemen

- Today is a day of great significance. For those who have just graduated I am sure you feel pleased, gratified and perhaps even a little apprehensive about the new worlds opening up to you.
- For parents, friends and loved ones, watching you graduate today no doubt stirred mixed memories of the times deadlines loomed, pressure increased and households had to temper their normal dynamics to accommodate your needs.
- Today, graduates, you join an elite group of people around the world who have completed tertiary education.
- Considering the huge numbers of people who achieve this distinction, you might wonder why I call this group an elite?
- I do so because in the context of a global population, where millions still lack even primary school education, University graduates are an elite group. Not everyone in this world has easy access to tertiary education. Some don’t even have such access to secondary or primary education.
- In East Timor, just North West of Darwin, 800,000 people are struggling to build a nation and provide a rudimentary education for their citizens. Sadly, 12% of children there do not survive to the age of 5 years old. I mention this not to spoil your day, but to suggest that if you are wondering what

this day means, you consider how you might sustain your sense of purpose and achievement by reaching out to others, no matter what paid employment you engage in.

- Graduates in the humanities have had special experiences to enable them to think reflectively, and to access deep contemplation on the meaning of life, culture, society and the role of individuals.
- Medieval universities grew out of monasteries, and the link between university education and spiritual life is still a strong echo in a liberal education. I refer to spiritual in the sense of touching that which is most human, and vulnerable, in searching for the divine and the timeless.
- One way many people engage in a liberal education is through reading. Through the stories of real and imagined life we become aware of ourselves as feeling and thinking beings who belong in a world potentially richer than, or very different to, our own everyday existence.
- The culture of narratives experienced through reading, viewing and even participating in dramas, can forever stimulate our minds and hearts. ‘*Once upon a time*’, that evocative opening phrase for childhood stories reminds us that things can happen once, but be significant more generally. Stories happen repeatedly.
- Heroes, gods, fairy queens, tyrants, angels, monsters, devils, supermen and their partners, superwomen, will always exist to inspire, threaten, challenge or protect us. Stories, myths and dramas of the human condition survive in literature, mass media and computer games because boardrooms, families, playgrounds, classrooms and offices are filled with their descendants. ‘*Once upon a time*’ hints at the challenge embedded within a statement of fact – namely, that even the

certainties of apparent facts can prove illusory when tested against reality and influenced by feelings

- As engaged participants in reading or viewing stories and dramas, we can choose our own identifications with characters and events, guessing or hypothesising what we would feel like in this or that role. (*Empathic Intelligence: teaching, learning, relating*, p.72) By developing the capacity to take the perspective of others, we become empathic. By knowing how to create a dynamic between thinking and feeling, within a climate of care we become effective professionals.
- For all the excitement of every changing, globally linked sophisticated world we live in, with its apparent opportunities, the shadow of the terrorism and unimaginable, human catastrophes created by humans and nature, cast their darkness across the dawn. When empathy and imagination fail to dispel that darkness, inspiration has to come from a primitive hope in the durability of a mysterious life force. Maybe that acceptance of mystery is a hallmark of empathy and imagination, at their most elusive and powerful.
- In narratives, the past and present exist in a seemingly timeless realm in which human characters confront physical challenges, emotional and moral dilemmas in some form, and implicitly suggest to us as readers how we might best choose to conduct our lives.
- The historians and literature lovers here know that the past is a tacitly known country. It is the geography and the architecture of our present. It can be cultivated and structured to enhance our understanding of the present. Even as we read or tell stories, we indulge in the hope of learning how to control the future. While not even narratives can achieve the impossible and foretell the future, the imaginative engagements they encourage, promote speculative thinking and belief in the ineffable.

- So we return to *Once upon a time* – a phrase that is timelessly evocative and paradoxical, a phrase which connects the past, present and future: memory, time and hope.
- Through time, memory and hope it hints at a coherence between physical, mental and emotional aspects of being. It functions like an algebra of human life.
- Those who can take the perspective of others, and can create a dynamic better thinking and feeling, in a climate which is intelligently, caring are empathically intelligent. Such persons are highly effective, even through their professional or personal orientations might move across a continuum of scientific and poetic ways of functioning.
- When empathic intelligence functions well, it can inspire excellence through the quality of its processes and outcomes. That quality of excellence relies on relationships, imagination and creativity to energise the theory implementation and planning involved in most significant enterprises.
- Such enterprises will be those involving people working together in mutually dependent and beneficial ways, whether on a small or large scale. (*Empathic Intelligence: teaching, learning, relating*, p.82-83)
- But this is your day and all I should do is give you some parting thoughts as you leave this stage in your life's journey.
- I hope that you feel both justified pride in your achievements, and a sense of responsibility to make something special of your personal uniqueness, your own special gifts, (and everyone has them), and discover your own special destiny.
- It was Shakespeare who reminded us through the character of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*:

- “Be not afraid of greatness; some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon ‘em.” (*Twelfth Night*, II, v, 156-159)
- It is a daring person who would add to Shakespeare, here ruminating on the nature/nurture debate, but his profound thoughts can stir reflections of our own, and I am mindful of those whose greatness is expressed in very small, but significant gestures:
 - the teacher who pauses to listen to the struggling student and discovers some hidden ability within;
 - the social worker who recognises an injustice and empowers the client to solve the problem;
 - the bureaucrat who imagines the consequences of proposed bad policies and pre-empts their acceptance;
 - the arts administrator who chooses aesthetically rich programs to enhance audience sensibilities, along with providing entertainment.
- A good education creates within you the knowledge, discernment and will to make a difference in great or small, but lasting and significant ways.
- A good education will have stirred your imagination to aspire to such greatness, while ever mindful of the need for resilience in the face of set-backs.
- Those gifted with the power of imagination will make a difference wherever they are.
- Again, your wide reading and rich intellectual and social experiences at University, should have given you some hint of your place in history, your place in this extraordinary, and rapidly changing global environment in which we are each but grains of sand.

- Lest that metaphor seems diminishing on such a special day, let me remind you what the visionary poet William Blake saw in a grain of sand.

He said, and I quote:

*To see a world in a Grain of Sand
And a heaven in a Wild flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour*

Auguries of Innocence (p.508)

- When I studied English Literature as a young undergraduate in this University some decades ago, I encountered these words of Blake and had no idea then what that meant. But I did remember that they struck some chord with me, and certainly meant something. I was just not sure what.
- Now, with extensive life and professional experience, I feel they mean everything. Which is why I am sharing them with you today.
- It is poets, artists, writers, teachers, architects, musicians and empathic people who open up the world of possibilities for us.
- Such people know, often intuitively, how to create a dynamic between cognitive and emotional intelligence.
- We have in this city of Sydney an extraordinary edifice, the Sydney Opera House, which attests to the power of imagination, genius, and resilience of one poetic architect, Joen Utzon.
- The kind of mind which can envision possibilities to create an Opera House, and the kinds of minds which can put visions

into effect, and appreciate the aesthetics of complexity, are very desirable creations of a liberal education. Trust your sensibilities and engage your capacities for discernment in seeking what is true, beautiful, good and life-enhancing.

- In both overt and subliminal ways, our lives can be transformed by recognising the place of ‘cathedrals of the mind’, whether they remain within as sources of reflection, or whether they are articulated through a drawing board to a building.
- Many a workplace is transformed by the private imagination within the cathedral of your own mind. And no-one knows what you are doing, until you symbolise your thoughts and feelings in some communicative way.
- Surely it is the purpose of a University education in the Humanities: to introduce you to the great minds of the past and present, to tantalise you, entice you, baffle you, engage you, challenge you, enthrall you.
- You will never forget an education which does even some of that.
- You might have reacted and protested at the things you had to read and write and discuss and reflect upon in your courses here. At times you must have felt the way forward was foggy. At others times someone must have provided a lamp to shine light on all kinds of possibilities.
- I hope you developed empathy for others and greater sensitivity to the richness of life experience.
- With an open, educated and curious mind you can become in your milieu, whether it be in political leadership, workplace leadership, creative endeavours, domestic life, relationships or something else, a great and significant person.

- I became an educator because some particular students at a particular time and place made an impact on my thinking and judgement.
- Some of these students were brilliant, some were rebellious, some were tarnished by school, many were insightful beyond their years.
- All were very special and they shaped my identity as an educator.
- You too will be shaped by those around you.
- It is an exhilarating and sometimes frightening experience to be open to shaping by life experiences.
- I hope your lecturers and tutors have mentored you to develop the skills and habits of mind to seek transforming experiences while developing the sense of humour, resilience and wit to cope with the drudgeries of daily life.
- Today this great University has bestowed its accolades upon you.
- You are special, you are favoured and there is a vast world of experience awaiting you outside the doors of this Great Hall.
- Armed now with a first-class tertiary education, step forward with courage, seek your destiny, exult in the greatness of others and you will transform your world.