

GRADUATION, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA, MARCH 29 2017

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May I offer my heartfelt congratulations also, all of you, and especially the new doctoral graduates.

You all earned your degrees. All I did to earn mine was write books, and live to be eighty-one.

But I am very grateful to the distinguished Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor and the Council of the University who decided on the delightful and inadvisable folly of giving me this honour.

You are the true people of this day, and what happens today will never leave you, or fail to influence us.

And now you want to get out into the afternoon, greet each other, receive the applause of your families and maybe more kisses than are necessary from your totally embarrassing mothers.

But the rule of these ceremonies is that before you can be liberated, you are forced by your university to listen to some older person give you a brief stint of advice or information.

You've heard of the soup of the day. Well, I am the boring old joker of the day.

I live in a publishing industry which, like most of the workplaces you will enter, is in revolution.

I began school in 1941 in a country town in New South Wales – Kempsey -- using a slate, and a slate pencil, and thus I am a Stone Age human.

You clearly are not, and have a degree to prove it.

But my Neolithic condition gives me room to ponder why there are so many human institutions still existing even though there seems no technological reason for them to survive.

It astonishes me how well the old-fashioned print book, the "Gutenberg"-style book, continues, even though it is perfectly possible to publish online exclusively.

I think we like to hold books because we are tactile animals.

As things stand, we still like the experience of measuring our way through an artefact of paper and inks.

After all, we have no technological use for cinemas either, yet we go to them because we are social animals and we love laughing or being scared in a pack.

There is similarly no technical reason why universities should not be entirely virtual. But we prefer that if we go to tertiary studies it should still be in a physical institution, one we walk through to establish a set of rich social and intellectual contacts.

Thus, technology cannot always change the sorts of creatures we are. Each of us remains a peculiar kind of gifted animal and angel.

Since our brain volume increased and our voice boxes evolved at a period of pre-history, at least, I would argue, seventy or more thousand years past, we have been the kings of language.

There is a wonderful theory that language began with young human mothers putting their babies down because, through lack of fur, they had no capacity to carry them continuously.

Thus language began as a mode of reassurance to the baby that, having been put down, the mother would pick it up again.

A form of “motherese” might have been the first language. In that case I am grateful for a wonderful life being a sort of minor valet or gardener of language, making my living by deploying mother-ese.

But like many other and better writers, I have made stories of love and animosity towards the despised people of the earth, about those who are ignored, and about people stuck on racial, religious and cultural fault-lines.

As an Australian redneck I'd always been engrossed in the question of why there was so much hate in Europe, and why it's still found there, all crammed into such a small space.

Since my father was an Australian soldier in North Africa, and regularly sent me home what I saw as souvenirs – German corporal's stripes, Nazi pistol holsters and Very pistols and other items – I was always enthralled by the way European hatred emerged in World War II, stoked by the demagogue Hitler and by others.

Let me rush to say that writers do not use this sort of material because we're noble people – many of us are terrible to live with, and my wife could tell you all about it.

We write about race and other divisions because they are full of high drama.

I have been fascinated by racial division ever since, as a little kid in a country town in the White Australia of the early 1940s, I saw Aboriginals from the local Greenhill settlement walk past our gate in Kempsey.

It was not a moral fascination. There was apartheid in Australia then. The mighty Thunguddi people who were stewards of the Macleay Valley, New South Wales, since the last Ice Age

formed that terrain, were not allowed to sit in the stalls at the picture shows with us, or swim in the town pool.

Why was that? That was the question that fascinated me.

What a tribute it will be to our community if, with support of all parties, we acknowledge that ancient culture, and those towering millennia of occupation of Australia before settlement, in our Constitution.

And wouldn't it be more than a gesture if at the same time, by the same vote, indigenous Australians were at last granted a decisive say in any legislation that effects them. That will bring about the employment of language, of "motherese", to make peace with ourselves.

I must congratulate you on choosing for your passion and your studies the humanities and humanitarianism.

And I ironically take the risk of celebrating that you have not become economists.

I don't mean to dismiss economists, or economics as a craft, though of course it thinks it's a science and that's its problem.

If it were a science, as exact as say, gastroenterology, there would have been far more consensus, and far more than the few minority opinions, in foretelling the Global Financial Crisis.

Like most punters I believe in economics in the sense that we do live and die by what economists say and, above all, by what they believe.

But you must, like me, have sometimes rebelled in front of your television as you hear the more pompous high priests of economics talking with sturdy infallibility as to what will befall us in the near and long term.

I wonder if the more flatulent of the high priests of market economics talk like that to the people they love, and whether proposing marriage they say, "Market trend would indicate the advisability of a merger, though a downturn in resources prices combined with the lasting buoyancy in the property market might cause some to hesitate until the quarterly figures for inflation are in, and the RBA makes its determination on interest rates."

We could admittedly make similar fun of the poorer imitations of literary theory. Economics is one valid map of the world, but it is not the *entire* world, or the ultimate rationale for life. And when it comes to love, the humanities has all the cards. Take, for example, the William Butler Yeats lines I quote on her birthday to my wife:

"How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true.
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face"

Or the greatest chat-up poem in the English language: Andrew Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress".

"Let us roll all our strength and all
Our Sweetness up into one ball,
And tear our pleasures with rough strife
Through the iron gates of life..."

Why was I mean to doctrinaire economists just now? It's because, as belief in God and the Divine Will wavers, belief in the market as the all-wise arbiter of our fortunes, and as the Moloch, the monstrous, unanswerable god we *must* serve, rides high.

Kerryn Higgs, in "Collision Course: Endless Growth on a Finite Planet", writes, "The neo-liberal economic agenda has not benefited the poor but widened inequality within and between nations."

So, again, why is the market the supreme arbiter on all issues – the arts, society, scholarly pursuit, medical research, and the increasingly clamant demands of the environment? Citizens have been reduced to consumers. The commodification of most of life, and a contempt for what can't be commodified, has made millions of us feel that they are dealt out of the economic equation?

I think of economics a great deal – I particularly do so as I am working at the moment on a screenplay about the Irish Famine,

I had sworn off screenplays for life – novelists are not always good at them, and I'd been sacked as a screenwriter once by the best, Steven Spielberg -- though he's a polite man and did it in the nicest possible way.

But an English producer pursued me to write this because he had read a study of famine I had written some years back, and I agreed to try it if he let my daughter, a beginner novelist, write it with me.

Famines traditionally occur not because there is a gross food emergency on a national scale, but because so many people in a particular community lack any entitlement to food.

Famines also occur because people living on very little land have only a few food staples and the chief one, rice, or in the case of the Irish, potatoes, fail.

During the Irish Famine, the government of Great Britain decided the best way to help the suffering was to protect the market in grain and livestock, and thus that grain and livestock would continue to be exported from Ireland.

That was the best hope for the Irish, argued the governments of Sir Robert Peel and Lord Melbourne.

Five years later, 1.5 million Irish had died, and the same number had fled the country. Throughout the rest of the century so many Irish left that Ireland is the only European

country whose population is barely more than 55 percent of what it was in the Census of 1841.

Why should I not be concerned therefore that the same rationale is applied now, in an age that cries out for clever solutions and for innovation?

In his 2016 book, "The Lucky Country? Reinventing Australia", Professor Ian Lowe declares, "We have written our future narrowly and given ourselves little room for adjustment without pain."

Why is that so?

Professor Robert Costanz in 1997 put the value of ecosystem services at \$33 trillion a year. By 2011 that figure had risen to \$125 trillion. What are we doing to exploit this new wealth? A 2% chance of terrorism on our streets is rightly taken seriously. But why does market economics discourage us from a similar determination in the case of an at least 50% chance of global warming, which could kill us more effectively than any terrorist?

Last question: Why do I interrupt your night of joy with contentious issues like this. I apologise. The big news of the day is your arrival on the scene, and let's keep it that way. For this brief purgatory of a speech ends here.

And now comes your rejoicing.

You have earned your imminent joy at your success. Because the most important thing tonight is that you go out there and celebrate now, and that then you go out into the further community.

There is – obviously and urgently -- a new Australia to be made. And in it, you will shine!

Congratulations!