

Occasional Address of Shaun Bonett

University of South Australia – 22.04.2022

Good afternoon, Chancellor Pauline Carr, Vice Chancellor and President Professor David Lloyd, Members of the University Council, Senior Management and staff of the University, Graduands, Friends and Family.

Thank you for this very special honour that is bestowed on me.

I feel truly humbled, and need to acknowledge that I am accepting it on behalf of many; my parents, my brother, family, friends and the talented and diligent group of people that I have worked with and who have supported me.

This recognition is also truly special for a second reason. It's special, because I appreciate the immense power of education and the fundamental place universities hold in our society.

Universities and this institution in particular, are the creative powerhouses of community, solving problems, creating change, thinking deeply and ultimately progressing humanity.

Mahatma Gandhi said it best:

“The aim of university education should be to turn out true servants of the people, who will live and die for the country's freedom.”

This great Adelaide institution is committed to these lofty principles and as a country and as a human race, we have never needed it more; graduates committed to helping and lifting up others.

For my part, I will accept this great honour and use it to recommit to helping others for the betterment of many. I again thank you for this opportunity.

The great aim of education is not just knowledge, but action.

In these tumultuous times, with so many national and global challenges weighing upon us, it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

We all react differently to pressure, some of us retreat, others charge forward.

Now at this time, we need leadership.

I ask you to not just accept the challenges facing your generation, but to seize them. In any hour of difficulty there is always an hour of opportunity. So, I ask you to charge forward.

We need every graduate in this room, to aim high, stay strong and find the solutions we require to continue life on this truly remarkable planet. You cannot stop dreaming about the future, because you are the future.

It's daunting, but it's been done before and again and humankind calls on its best and brightest to ensure its survival.

The graduates in this room are some of the smartest people on the planet. If it's not you, who is going to do it? You carry the torch of promise and the light of hope. In your hands is the ability to shape the future.

I have just given you a very big challenge to take on, but I am not going to leave you unarmed or unprepared.

As you finish your study and start out on this quest, I want to give you some guidance that has helped me throughout my life.

I will call this advice an elixir, in fact it's an "elixir of life".

Now this might sound like some sort of magical potion from Harry Potter or Lord of the Rings, and I can see some smiles out there, but for me, my elixir of life has provided me the greatest clarity.

Drinking my elixir is not a light ask, it requires continual contemplation and reflection on whether we are having the biggest impact that we can have in our lives, throughout our lives.

Through practice and patience, we can hone an understanding that ultimately will allow us to be our greatest self.

What I am giving you all today, is my key to unlocking unlimited potential in yourself and others. It is actually very simple.

The elixir of life is the development of truly authentic relationships and limitless compassion.

Graduates, meaningful relationships, and compassion give me the greatest moments of joy in the good times, guide me through the bad times and provide me with a sense of tranquil calm whenever life slows down.

These principles enrich my life daily, guiding me forward and protecting me in the most challenging of times.

There is nothing more important.

So, what is a meaningful relationship and how do we create more of them?

Well, they are not shallow or superficial and they are rarely ever found on the internet.

It perplexes me. As a society, we have never been more connected to each other online. Each of us can have hundreds and thousands of friends on social media, but all the evidence shows that people have never felt more isolated, more depressed, and more pessimistic about the future. How can this be the case?

Unfortunately, these social media platforms for all their obvious benefits, largely fill our time with superficiality, weak ties that seem real, but ultimately are just loose connections and acquaintances.

The social media companies play with us.

They know our psychology and keep us hooked into their networks seeking “likes” and approval to get that hit of dopamine to make us feel good for an instant.

In practice it’s an identical process to a gambler playing a poker machine in a casino. Both processes are just not healthy.

As a result, we are building lives based on **superficial** foundations.

It is *not* meaningful, and in fact it’s perniciously toxic.

So, what is an *authentic connection*?

For me, it’s measured in the amount of *real* moments that matter between you and another person. Real moments, where we treat those around us as equals, with empathy and of course compassion.

I urge you to go back to basics, assess your relationships. Do better to build genuine friendships, authentically support communities, cherish your families, and close friends, be compassionate and most importantly actively listen, really listen to those around you.

Everyone has a story and wants to tell it. By truly listening to other people’s needs and wants, we can find solutions to conflict and the challenges that confront us.

Let me tell you a couple of stories from my life that may assist you to put all this into practice

In the 1990's Australia was going through a tough time economically. Businesses were failing and banks were looking to unpick what value they could from the wreckage.

I found myself as a young lawyer thrust into dealing with corporate administrations and personal bankruptcies. It was soul destroying.

After witnessing much heartache and misery over this time, at the age of 23, I decided that I instead needed to be involved in the activity of creating and building.

I chose not to build my life on the miseries of others, but to pursue a form of social entrepreneurship, to help people by empowering the little guy and backing the underdog.

I set-off on my mission to make things better and to pursue excellence.

I decided to go into business and Precision Group was born.

There is no secret to success in business, it comes down to having the right product, deeply understanding your customer and hard work. It started with one small shopping centre in South Australia, and over almost three decades became a thriving portfolio of property assets and diversified interests in other innovative businesses.

It's been a wild and rewarding ride and it gets better every day.

As the philosopher Gilbert Chesterton said, "An Inconvenience Is Only an Adventure Wrongly Considered", and I try to apply this approach to the challenges in my life.

Enabled by my success in business, I have now been able to invest my time and resources to deeply disadvantaged communities that need help.

The dearest to my heart is the relationships I have built with our First Nations People, supporting their fight against the atrocious wrongs that were committed against them by the Goliath of governments, in the form of stolen wages.

On this injustice, I chose to be driven by compassion, to stand with our First People in Queensland, Western Australia, and the Northern Territory to support fair wages for fair work and address the injustices of the past.

Whilst we have had some wins, it's a fight that is ongoing, and one that we will never give up on.

Today I have asked what makes a meaningful connection? I have shown you what this looks like for me in business and for a community, but I also wish to address this on a personal level.

Her name is Christine Holgate.

Christine, was the previous CEO of Australia Post, an organisation that employs over 50,000 people nationwide.

She had her **name** and **reputation** dragged through the mud on the national stage by our Prime Minister.

Christine is a close friend, she rang me the day our Prime Minister said those horrible things about her, seeking guidance. She was rightfully distraught by this bullying behaviour. She was between a rock and a hard place, the Government had unlimited lawyers and funds to fight her.

I replied to her, “You must stand up and defend yourself Christine, this is a gross injustice, I will be there to support you all the way.”

Christine fought the government and I publicly stood by her, from the first day of her ordeal, until she was cleared by the Senate.

That is what meaningful personal relationships are about. You will truly appreciate them when your own backs are against the wall and you are fighting for your reputation or position. Friendship is not when it is convenient – friendship is when it is needed. It is easy to be called a friend. It is by far more difficult to be one.

Ladies & Gentlemen, it's in these hard moments, changing careers, staring down governments, fighting injustices, when you must drink all of my elixir.

Our time on this planet is finite, and living our values is what defines us.

Writing down high ideals on a charter simply won't cut it.

I challenge each of you to be able to do more than speak your values, but to strive to demonstrate them in your actions.

If in action you miss the mark, that is okay.

Winning is not in how many successes you have,

it is in never giving up,

it is in staying loyal to your values, and

by adding meaning to your relationships.

If everyone does this, if everyone drinks this elixir, our world will be the place Aristotle through to Martin Luther King Jr envisioned.

Conclusion:

I leave where I began, with the elixir of life, no matter how alone you are, no matter how hard or easy your life is, no matter the provocation or insult, show compassion and build real connection.

In return, you will know unfathomable success and have great happiness in your life. As long as you continue dreaming, you are going to remain young. So my advice to you – don't ever stop dreaming.

I wish you well for the future and look forward to following your successes as you strive for greatness.

Thank you.