

University of South Australia **Graduation Speech**
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Thank you Pro Chancellor Evans.

Chancellor. Vice Chancellor. Distinguished Guests. Graduands. Family and friends...

25 years ago I was sitting in your chairs, about to graduate.

Like you I was looking ahead with excitement, but also some apprehension, about where my soon-to-be-career would take me. Certainly I could never have imagined ahead of time what that path would actually look like – one that has found me working in environments ranging from corporate headquarters, through to the slums of the developing world.

Upon reflection I think there were two critical moments in that journey – as you may also find in yours. The day I decided what I wanted to *do* as a profession, and the day I discovered how that could make a meaningful *difference* to the world around me.

For me that is the essential difference between pursuing a career and discovering your vocation. It is this distinction that I'd like to focus on today.

I was in the Philippines a few years back with World Vision. We were being addressed by a Catholic priest, famous in that country for his work with the urban poor, and particularly the communities who eke out a living in the rubbish tips of Manila.

He said something quite strange that has stayed with me ever since. Though I didn't fully understand what he meant at the time, I sensed that this was a profound insight that I would need to explore for myself.

I'd like to unpack it with you today – as some of you may also find that this has value in your lives, as you look ahead to *who* you want to become.

He said, **"You can only find yourself if you become more than yourself."** (*repeat*)

A rather cryptic and curious comment to make. I wondered whether something had been lost in translation. But the truth it contains has gradually unfolded for me in the years since.....

In my earlier career, after graduating from this same institution, I was fortunate enough to have climbed high up the corporate ladder. I'd had some terrific bosses, I worked very hard, and enjoyed the success that came as a result. Nothing wrong with that. I hope that the opportunities that open up for you are even better.

But, as you'll hear some people say, when you get to the top of the professional pile, it's not – of itself – as magical or deeply satisfying as you might imagine it to be before you get there.

I wouldn't change much about that journey. And I can't say that I didn't enjoy the recognition and the corporate perks. But there's still the sense that there ought to be more to it than just ascending to the top of some imagined peak. There still remains the desire to have real impact; to do something of greater significance.

And so, over time I gradually became more involved in the community, eventually ending up at World Vision, one of the world's largest international aid and development organisations.

What I came to realise was that even for those who aspire to be the best, the way to a more authentic sense of purpose is not so much 'up', as 'across'. To reach out to others. To embrace the community and world around you, rather than trying to slip past them on your way to some new height, serving only your own aspirations.

“You can only find yourself if you become more than yourself.”

If you want a good job, develop your skills and work hard.

If you want to be a leader worth following, then channel your own personal ambition through the mission of your organisation, whether that's a business, a government agency, or a hospital.

But most importantly of all, if you want to discover your true calling, and your sense of vocation, then you need to serve an idea far greater than your own self-interest.

Find ways to use your abilities to address the needs of those who are at a disadvantage. Those whose voices are not sufficiently heard. Those whose own potential cannot be realised without a helping hand. Those who might have been *you* if not for an accident of birth; the lottery of life; the hard work of your parents; or the determination of those who went before you in forging positive change in your own societies.

In the process of so doing what you'll find is not just a sense of satisfaction in some kind of self-righteous, 'do-gooder' way. What you'll discover is the great paradox - that the insight, dignity and bravery of the so-called poor and disadvantaged will humble *you* - and you'll learn far more from them about life than anything you might teach them.

You don't have to join a charity to do this. You can carry this mindset through virtually any profession, any sector. Whether you're an engineer, a planner, a healthcare professional, an academic, or an entrepreneur – all such roles offer

valuable skills and platforms from which to make a difference to the world around you.

Know that, **“You can only find yourself if you become more than yourself.”**

Just last week I was in Brazil, spending time in World Vision projects in the favelas of Fortaleza - one of the most violent cities in the world.

We met with a group of teenage boys who were former members of a drug gang that had terrorised their community.

They were referred to by the community as, ‘The Children from Hell’.

Their world was so toxic, so brutal, that of the original gang members, no less than 36 were subsequently murdered in revenge attacks by rival gangs.

In seeking to avoid a similar fate the remaining 15 boys had to dramatically turn their lives around - which they did – aided by the heroic efforts of one of our amazing youth workers in that community.

This transformation was so complete that the group is now known as, ‘The Children of God’.

Almost all are now either back at school, in apprenticeships, or in employment.

These 15 have now attracted another 135 at-risk youth into their group, and are helping them turn their lives around also.

The colleague who leads this initiative, continually reinforces one key principle with the group. He repeatedly says to them,

“There are 150 of you. You each have one job... To look after 149 others.”

By doing so the boys are keeping each other strong, protected, encouraged, and away from the forces that might drag one of their brothers back to the dark side.

That is to say, by building a culture where each person puts the interests of others before their own, a better life is created for all. Rather than each looking only out for themselves, there are 149 others who have got their backs.

Again, **“You can only find yourself if you become more than yourself.”**

Though none of us may be from such extreme circumstances, the same principle should apply in our careers, and as active citizens of our communities. To look out for our colleagues; our clients or patients; our community; and the disadvantaged and at-risk, both near and far. This is our opportunity to find our deeper vocational calling; to be of significance; and to enjoy living in a community rich in social capital.

As Churchill put it, “*you make a living by what you get, but you make a life by what you give.*”

George Bernard Shaw put the choice more bluntly. “*The true joy in life*” he said, “*is being used for a purpose recognised by yourself as a mighty one....*” The alternative, is to become “*a feverish selfish little clod of ailments and grievances complaining that the world will not devote itself to making you happy.*”

For me, such complaining and self-centredness conjures up the image of a hypochondriac trapped in a snow dome, watching a more engaged life pass them by.

It seems to me that we all have **three options** as we look ahead and think about our own aspirations for career and life:

1. Have high ambitions for ourselves, but be self-centred about it, and serve only our own ego. Let’s call that the ‘Snow Dome Option’.
2. We can simply aim low. Phil Dunphy, the lead character from the TV comedy, *Modern Family*, upon taking a cheap course in philosophy, came up with his own gem. He said, “*The most amazing things that can happen to a human being will happen to you – if you just lower your expectations.*”
3. Or there’s the third option.... To aim high, but to channel that ambition altruistically through the people around you. To engage with those both high and low in society, in the knowledge that you will learn and grow equally through both kinds of interaction. To be a professional who stands *for benefit* – for the benefit of their organisation, their clients, their community, and even the world.

To be purpose-driven and generous in spirit is to have a life of discovery – the gradual finding and shaping of oneself through service to others.

It’s a simple thought really. If you’re someone who wants to give of yourself:

- you’ll have lifetime of opportunity. The generous person will find new possibilities to contribute wherever they turn;
- you will be much closer to the true origins and heart of your profession. You will join in with the proud tradition of service and innovation of those that went before you, and become part of the future story of those who come after;
- if you practice generosity of spirit, you’ll come to understand the power each of us has to make a difference. You’ll treat others with respect, and they in turn will respect you;
- unlike our proverbial ‘snow dome hypochondriacs’, *your* world will grow larger and larger – whereas the world of the stingy grows smaller and smaller;

- you will enjoy a fuller life than someone who gathers only for themselves, or clambers to the top of the ladder, only to discover too late just how much they have missed along the way;
- you will not die wondering. Leaving nothing on the field, but rather, leaving a legacy in the life of others;
- ***that is to say.... you will become more than yourself.***

To have such an outlook may or may not result in material wealth. You may or may not be receive public accolades for what you do. You will not necessarily be immune from the tragedies of life that could befall any of us.

No matter how idealistic you may be, it *won't* be a fairy tale ride. It won't be easy. But both in the end, and along the way, this pursuit *will* be worth it.

In closing, let me pass on to you the encouragement of another humble voice from my journey, this time from India.

I was with a group of colleagues in Delhi, at a workshop to explore ways in which we could grow World Vision's impact in poor urban communities. Part-way through the afternoon session the doors opened and an elderly Indian gentleman shuffled into the room with his walking frame. He slowly walked to the middle of the room and sat down at one of the tables.

We were somewhat puzzled by this unannounced visitor. One of my colleagues gently pulled up alongside him and asked, "*sir, are you in the right room?*"

He said, "*yes, yes, I am, thank you*".

"*Are you sure???*" "*Yes*" he replied again, looking quite certain of himself.

To be honest my assumption was that he may have been looking for some lost marbles... but we continued with our workshop, with this great-grandfatherly figure patiently sitting at the table, just smiling away.

A colleague brought him cups of tea throughout the afternoon.

When the meeting was about to finish the elderly visitor asked politely if he could say something.

And we were humbled by what he said....

He explained that he himself had dedicated his life to the service of the poor in these slum communities; following the footsteps of his father, who had been imprisoned with Gandhi, and had also dedicated his life to this cause.

He said to us... *“I am familiar with the good work that you do, and heard that you were meeting today. I simply wanted to come along and encourage you to keep going; to not give up; and to never tire of doing good. It is worth it.”*

To you graduands, I would offer this same encouragement:

Be a great professional, and excel at what you do...

... but at the same time search for your higher vocational calling...

... by pursuing a purpose greater than yourself, and through a life of generosity and service toward others.

Seek to do well, by doing good...

... which is to say, **find yourselves by becoming more than yourselves.**

Thank you, and congratulations!

[END]