

UniSA Graduation
March 25 2015

Good morning. It is a pleasure to be here today on this special occasion.

I acknowledge that we meet on the traditional lands of the Kurna people.

I also acknowledge the Chancellor Dr Ian Gould and Vice-Chancellor and President Professor David Lloyd,

distinguished guests, members of staff, graduating students, family and friends.

To the 422 students graduating today I offer my warmest congratulations.

Today is your day - you must feel enormous relief, a relief mixed with pride, excitement and optimism.

I also pay tribute to your parents, partners and friends who have supported and encouraged you through these years of study. They, no doubt, are even more relieved that this day has finally arrived.

I also congratulate and thank your teachers, for their contributions, to not only your achievements, but to the pursuit of knowledge and learning in our State.

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In preparation for today I was told that I should speak for about eight minutes.

That led me to think about time and, in particular, about what - one can achieve in eight minutes.

180th of one day.

Let me tell you, a lot can happen in eight minutes -

During the time it takes me to deliver this talk the world's population will increase by about 1200 people.

A Boeing 747 travelling at top speed could cover 132 kilometres.

In 1997 a young Kenyan man, Daniel Komen, ran two miles in just under 8 minutes.

And on May 9 2010 a young American, Joseph Chestnut, known as 'Jaws' set a world record in Singapore - by eating 380 wontons in 8 minutes.

When one contemplates life it is easy to mount an argument that all we really have - is time.

What kind of life we have is determined by how we choose to spend that time. Do we waste it, do we try and cram too much into it, do we worry about how much there is left, do we share it?

How do we balance our work life with our family life? How do we balance accumulating assets with accumulating wisdom?

These are all big questions which probably require more contemplation than the eight minutes available today.

So in the time remaining, probably about 250 wantons worth, I want to talk about work time.

When we describe a person's working life we often use the term 'career'.

My online dictionary tells me that 'career' as a noun means 'an occupation undertaken for a significant period of a person's life and with opportunities for progress'.

But 'career' has another meaning; the same source tells me that as a verb 'career' means to 'move swiftly and in - an uncontrolled way'.

When I look back at my working life, it is the second meaning which has most resonance.

As a young man I really didn't know what I wanted to do with my life, let alone know what career I wanted.

And because of that uncertainty I followed the 1970s philosophy of 'going with the flow' - I changed cities, courses, jobs and friendship groups looking for direction and meaning.

Somehow through the process of moving in a 'swift and uncontrolled way', I discovered what I was looking for and what I discovered was something that had been part of me for a very long time.

From the time I was about 10, I have been a student of politics - I followed politicians the way that other kids followed sports stars. Election days were my grand finals.

And like most sports fans who fantasised about playing professional sport so I fantasised about being a politician. I gave the best speeches ever about issues of the day - in my head!

As I matured, my understanding of politics developed from a fascination with personalities and contests.

I began to understand the nature of power, who has it and how it is used and for what purposes.

I also reached a moral position - that those of us who experience the privileges and opportunities that a tertiary education bring have a duty to use our skills and talents for the common good.

And that's why I became a teacher. I thought then and still think that schools are the most powerful institutions that we have, to transform lives and to improve society.

As Neil Kinnock, leader of the British Labour Party famously put it in 1987:

"Why am I the first Kinnock in a thousand generations to be able to get to university? Was it because our predecessors were thick? Does anybody really think that they didn't get what we had because they didn't have the talent or the strength or the endurance or the commitment? Of course not. It was because there was no platform upon which they could stand."

I liked teaching - I liked it a lot; but I liked the politics of teaching even more.

In a gap year from teaching I thought long and hard about my future.

As I contemplated the venn diagram of my inner being, I realised that the point of overlap between what I was interested in and what I was good at was 'politics'.

I decided to join up and have a go. My fantasy world slowly became my real world.

I had finally found my vocation. Life became clearer; my ambition had a focus.

I now had an occupation which would be 'undertaken for a significant period' of my life and where there were 'opportunities for progress'.

We all need work, a job of some sort to provide us with an income to live and to give us that sense of dignity which comes from 'doing an honest day's work for an honest day's pay'.

In addition, having a profession - that set of skills, learnings and experiences that allows one to be an independent expert - is a great thing. It usually means a higher pay scale [but not always], and it certainly confers higher social status.

Importantly, professionals are leaders in their workplaces and usually in the community too. What you think and say matters to others.

Your graduation today tells the world that you are among those to be so acknowledged.

Jobs are essentially contracts - you do a set amount of work for a set amount of reward; professions are qualifications - you jump over enough hurdles to be recognised as an expert.

What then of your vocation? Where does it come from? and why is important?

I started teaching more than 40 years ago and left after about 12 years - for me that was enough.

I still know people who started teaching all those years ago, who still teach and who still love it and look forward each day to working with children. They truly found their vocation - or calling - and have had happy and productive lives ever since.

Even though I haven't been in a classroom for many years the skills I developed there have been incredibly useful in my political career; as have my experiences selling toys in a department store, loading trucks in a biscuit factory and driving taxis around the streets of Sydney.

Even my law degree came in handy.

As an MP for 16 years I observed many people from a host of backgrounds who entered parliament.

Most do it for the right reasons - they want to make the community better - they truly have a calling and they enjoy the life, even if they don't achieve higher office.

Others enter for the wrong reasons; perhaps they are following in the footsteps of a successful parent, or because of the presumed status, rewards or power associated with the role, or they just happen to be in the right place at the right time.

Political life does not make this group happy.

Given we spend so much of our life at work - and this generation will need to spend even more years in the workforce - it is important that we love what we do.

Nobody can tell me that Mick Jagger still tours and performs because he needs the money - clearly he cannot 'not perform'.

That should be the test: is this work that you do not only something that makes you feel good, is it something without which your life would be diminished?

You might already have found your calling - if so congratulations - you should enjoy a satisfying working life. If you don't know yet; don't panic - be open to new experiences, don't ignore opportunities, explore your world. Your qualifications, to be conferred shortly, give you a great starting point.

In particular I would encourage you to think about the big challenges facing humanity and how your life might be enriched by being part of their solution.

I think of issues like climate change, international conflicts and their consequences, the ageing of our population, spread of diseases such as Ebola, disruptive technologies, the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians, gender inequality, the post-industrial economy.

As I mentioned earlier I think those of us who have been advantaged by higher education have a responsibility to put back in - and considering the fields that today's graduates have chosen to study I am confident that you do not need to be lectured on that point.

Congratulations to all of you on your achievements to date, I wish you all the very best for your future and can assure you that my generation will be watching what you do, in eager anticipation of being amazed and delighted.

John Hill