

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, and graduates.

I want to express my great appreciation of the honour the university has bestowed on me with this award. I came to Curtin in 1977, fresh out of completing my PhD in the UK, and worked here until 1985. It was an exciting place to work, with an innovative interdisciplinary teaching program and a wonderful cohort of students who were often the first in their family to have had the chance to attend a university. They were such a pleasure to teach. Over the time I was here, I moved from teaching in literary studies to developing programs based on approaches emerging from what were then the very new fields of cultural and media studies: the program here was one of the earliest in Australia to embrace these new fields and Curtin has maintained its leading position in cultural and media studies ever since. These were, in effect, new academic disciplines and it is not surprising that their take-up was highly contentious at the time. I will admit that I was probably the one who was most responsible for generating that contention: I was the one who wanted to introduce cultural studies. I have suspected that Curtin was probably quite glad to see the back of me when I left, so this award is an especially welcome form of recognition and perhaps of forgiveness for all the trouble I caused!

Cultural studies, media studies, and gender studies were all part of a program of academic renovation that over the 1980s came to be called 'the new humanities'. Their development did cause some consternation, both inside and outside the academy: *The Australian* newspaper still occasionally throws out an editorial warning about the threat from what they call 'postmodernism'. Rather than constituting a threat, however, the new humanities were a necessary complement to the traditional studies in literature, history, philosophy and so on.

They helped us to find better ways of enabling our disciplines to understand the dramatically changing social world that had emerged from the 1960s.

Even so, the changes we faced then are nothing to what we face now, particularly in the way our use of the media has become so thoroughly integrated into our lives. There are some serious challenges there, as I am sure many of you will have discussed in your classes. As our society becomes more and more mediatized, as humans lose the battle for attention to their handheld devices, and as social media and email have allowed the world of work to colonise our social lives, the need for people who can understand this new environment and suggest how best to address it, is now quite urgent.

I have spent much of my life advocating for the relevance and importance of the humanities disciplines, such as those within which you have just graduated, so forgive me if I dwell on that issue for a moment. Society is now taking an increasingly instrumental view of the function of higher education, and universities are encouraged to reinvent themselves as businesses or solely as training institutions. It is important that we maintain our awareness of what risks being lost as a consequence of such tendencies. Among the fields at risk are the humanities and creative arts. The mission of the humanities is to help us to understand what it is to be human, surely an important mission. However, in a world where politics so often focuses on the growth of the economy before the enrichment of its social fabric, it is easy for the value of the arts and humanities to be overlooked. That value has a number of dimensions, however. One of those, of course, is as a means of training people to take up positions in the workforce and contribute to the economy. Over 60% of the Australian workforce with a tertiary education has a degree in the humanities or social sciences. But, the primary benefit of the nation's investment in higher education in the humanities is not in the end merely economic. It is more fundamental than that. As we have seen elsewhere in recent times, a nation and a public culture that loses its respect for the truth, that forgets the lessons

of history, that underestimates the power of language, and that ceases to observe the ethics of debate in its strategies of critique, endangers the fabric of its society. Your success, your education, and how they are put to work, are among the ways in which we can guard against such dangers.

So, I congratulate you on the choice of your area of study, as well as upon your success. And I hope it has brought you more than just success. At their best, degrees in the humanities provide you with an education that is ultimately highly personal. The really important things that happened to you during this degree happened in just that way only to you: the class, the idea, the reading, or the teacher that made the most impression on you is a personal possession and now part of what you are. At its best, an education in the humanities is an education of the self.

Not to be overly serious about all this, I should say that I am sure that there will be other, less elevated, but nonetheless extremely useful, informal skills that you will have developed on your way through – skills that your lecturers witness every day. Among the ones that impressed me when I was still teaching are:

- The convincing delivery of the plausible explanation for a failure to make a deadline (the claim that the computer crashed or there has been a sudden death in the family). Some of you have, I am sure, developed this to a fine art, but occasionally there is a failure of memory that messes it all up; the grandmother of one of my students had the great misfortune of dying twice within the same year!.
- The capacity to take the high moral ground at points which could otherwise be regarded as those of moral failure. That is often expressed as: ‘I just wouldn’t be satisfied handing this in like this; one more day and it will be so much better’. My usual translation of this one is ‘I haven’t written it yet’.

- And, finally, the astute assessment of character: as implied by advice such as ‘do his assignment last, he always gives extensions’.

These will all stand you in good stead in the future, so I encourage you to continue to develop them.

A word, now, to those graduating with higher degrees, and in particular to those who have completed their PhDs, let me say your life can now only get better. No longer will every conversation you have with people seem to bear an oblique but still compelling connection to your thesis topic. And your loved ones will no longer have to wonder just what is going on in your head as you sit staring into space for minutes at a time. You have come through, you have prevailed, you have proved you are at least as good as thought you could be, and you now deserve to just relax a little.

Let me also say a word to the ones who tend to get forgotten at moments like this: the parents. The university encounters the parents at their most active while prospective students are making their choices – so, usually at the information sessions on open days. For their children at that time, parents are a potentially embarrassing, but unavoidable, presence during these early conversations with the university’s teaching staff. Once the students are actually engaged in the course, we only get the occasional message from home: ‘my dad read the stuff you sent us to read, and he said it was all a load of rubbish’. And as a teacher of media, back in the days when families still sat and watched television together, I used to conduct an informal survey on how many fathers would take the remote control with them when they left the room to stop other members of the family changing channels while they were out. But despite your relative silence, we know that you are out there supporting your children, and that today represents an achievement in which you, too, can justifiably take great pride. So, congratulations to you, too, on supporting your graduate through this experience.

Finally, a word about aspiration, about aiming high. The job market is tight these days, and people are rightly concerned about where they will find their spot. But it is important to know what it is you really want to do, and not to give up too easily on that aspiration. When I was teaching here, I supervised a very talented creative writing student, who clearly was likely to get his novels published and who hoped to be able to live off his writing. However, I thought it wise to counsel him that it would be difficult for him to achieve that ambition; so few writers in Australia at that time were able to live off their work and so I told him he was going to need a day job. Well, he never did get that day job. That student's name is Tim Winton, he has become one of Australia's most successful writers of fiction, and his success has come from his talent, from a strong sense of self-belief, and from the courage to follow his aspirations. There is a lesson in that for all of us.

Congratulations to all of you and best wishes for a rewarding and exciting future.