

Curtin University
Occasional Address - Graduation
Honorary Doctor of Science
11 February 2017

Good morning distinguished guests, graduates, and supporters. Thank you for the privilege of sharing this special occasion with you and addressing you this evening.

I am deeply honoured and humbled by the award of this Honorary Doctor of Science – one which was completely unexpected... so much so that my rather shocked parents asked me if that means they get to call me “Doctor Doctor” now!

So yes graduates, even when you get to my age you can still make your parents proud!

Firstly, I wish to thank the University for the privilege of joining the ranks of some of Australia’s most respected people – including Professor Fiona Stanley founder of the Telethon Institute, Sir Arvi Parbo, a pioneer of our mining industry and Andrew Mackenzie CEO of BHP Billiton. And I cherish the opportunity to use this honour to continue to promote a sustainable global society in which all can flourish.

Today I would like to use the next few minutes to share with you THREE things I have learned as you embark on the next stage of your lives. I have to say, it seems a bit weird for someone with a scientific bent to be imparting wisdom to

graduates in Accounting, Economics and Finance – but I hope that sharing some lessons from my story may just help you in your own journey.

So..... number 1..... DON'T FENCE ME IN

Cole Porter wrote it, Bing Crosby sang it and Harry Connick Jnr covered it – and it remains relevant today.

When I first graduated from uni, I thought of myself as a scientist – one who would always observe the world through the lens of facts, analysis and scientific endeavour. As I grew into my career, I became more conscious that I didn't wanted to be pigeon-holed into a particular discipline, because I had more to offer than just my scientific training. So I looked for opportunities to stretch beyond my degree discipline – I tried (not very successfully) to be a Company Secretary, at one stage I tried my hand in Agri-business, and I once ran a rather large mining operation. In other words, I took career risk and didn't fence myself in – all of these jobs were outside my comfort zone and certainly not based on my earlier studies.

If I had allowed my degree to define me, I would very likely be passionately fighting the environment cause somewhere, or be buried in a nuclear science research lab. I would not have become a CEO, or been a part of a global team that worked in a South African township to help establish a local bicycle business or accompanied our Prime Minister to India to talk about a Free-Trade Agreement.

Today in Australia we focus too much on what degree you have gained at the end of your university education rather than on the person you have become.

Whether you completed your degree with all High Distinctions or Passes, your GPA is actually not that important – it does not define you for life. Now that it is done - who cares what your grades are? It is the person you have become and the person you can be that is important.

What does define you is the way in which you have learned to learn. Your degree is the foundation upon which your career can be built. But do not let it limit you in the future – just because you have studied accounting, economics or finance doesn't mean you have to be an accountant, economist or financier for the rest of your life!

In her address to Harvard Business School in 2014, Sheryl Sandberg said

“Careers are not a ladder; they’re a jungle gym ... look for opportunities, look for growth, look for impact, look for mission. Move sideways, move down, move on, move off. Build your skills, not your résumé. Evaluate what you can do, not the title they’re going to give you. Do real work...and don’t expect a direct climb.”

So while you might start a career in your degree discipline – don't fence yourself in. Stretch yourself. Create opportunities, and be prepared to explore different paths. Climb around on your own career jungle gym and enjoy the richness of painting your own career canvas that does not

necessarily involve a ladder. Remember the game of Snakes and Ladders? It can be a one way trip.

So to my second tip STAY HUNGRY

More correctly, Steve Jobs in his address to Stanford graduation in 2005 said

“Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish.”

He also said...

“Keep looking. Don’t settle.”

This is what I want to focus on – the joy that comes from being open to learning and challenge and taking risks – because I am pretty sure that none of us needs advice about how to stay foolish!

When I turned 50, my husband Joe bought me a baby grand piano. This was because there were two things in life that I had always wanted to do – one was to be an engineer and the other was to learn the piano. Given that the chance to become an engineer had long past me when I failed maths and physics in first year uni (I had a great time by the way and thank goodness for geology classes!) – there was still a chance I could fulfil the second ambition. This is what Joe tapped into.

However..... the piano came with a condition. Having studied for 5 qualifications at 4 different universities in Australia, Joe was adamant that I could only have the piano if I promised I would never go to uni again.

So I promised. I started like any 4 year old – twinkle twinkle little star got a real work out. But I soon realised that to learn I needed to take risks – I could be a complete failure at piano rather being Missy Higgins but I was willing to give it a try.

I believe the same holds true for our careers. Keeping your mind and heart open all of your life to learning – not just in formal study but in life experiences – means you will contribute more than you expected. You may even be surprised at how many more opportunities open up as a result. The best people I have ever worked with have been those who have been open to new ideas, new experiences, new ways of thinking, and willing to take risks.

They have also been open to failure.

In his address to Princeton Uni in 2012, Ben Bernanke the head of the US Federal Reserve said:

“Nobody likes to fail but failure is an essential part of life and of learning. If your uniform isn't dirty, you haven't been in the game.”

So to get dirty, you will likely need to take some risks and make some mistakes. Mark Zuckerberg did it in starting Facebook. So did Steve Jobs who got very publicly fired from Apple the first time around..... so did Margaret Thatcher, who failed in her first two bids to be elected to British Parliament.

Like all these people, you have to think bold, take risks and make mistakes.

In other words, you may need to be like a turtle – you have to stick your neck out to get anywhere. This could mean that your career path may take many twists and turns and end up being in a very different place to what you first imagined. It is no coincidence that some of the strongest, most resilient and self-sustaining shapes in nature are curves and circles rather than straight lines and right angled bends.

Today's career reality is that there are no straight lines. By taking a curved path, one with many twists and turns that relies on you taking risks, making mistakes and learning from them – you will be able to adapt to the fast changing world, and build a strong, resilient and self-sustaining life.

So Stay Hungry. Don't Settle. And Keep looking.

As a post script I've managed to make it on the piano to Elton John's Crocodile Rock. And to my darling husband Joe who is with me tonight by the way – here I am at Curtin Uni being awarded an honorary degree..... I wonder if that disqualifies the piano gift?

Finally tip number 3..... SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

In the 1800's, Charles Darwin's thesis of the evolution of the species included the notion that those species that were better adapted to coping with the opportunities and risks presented by environmental factors would have a better chance of survival, which he described as the "survival of the fittest".

Fast forward almost 200 years, and the term seems as relevant today. Our global economy is highly interconnected, technology innovation is re-defining our lives and careers, and geopolitical uncertainty is contributing to involuntary migration of people and the emergence of a new form of nationalism. And all in a context that challenges how much the natural environment can sustain our lifestyle.

But even with such volatility and global uncertainty, it is not only adaptation to the rapid development of technology that I believe will be critical to your future. It is your relationships – because despite all the innovation, it is still people that drive our global economy.

Early in my career, I was known as a person who got things done, an over-achiever who was ambitious, uncompromising, impatient, driven.... Often I was called “feisty”. I was usually the only woman in the crib room, on the mine site, or at the management team meetings, and I got things done by pushing through – whether the rest of the team came with me or not. It was an effective style of leadership in terms of delivering the results, but for everyone else around, I suspect it was exhausting.

In fact, my dad would say that those who work with me today are lucky – they are getting the mellow version of Vanessa. I have my children to thank for that.

It was when our oldest son, Alistair was about 2 years old that I learned the true value of adapting my leadership style. I was doing the supermarket shopping one Saturday morning when Alistair decided he absolutely needed his favourite

biscuit – NOW! This was not in my morning's plan, I had things to do – ambitious, uncompromising and driven. So I issued clear instructions and demanded obedience.

Now anyone who has lived with a 2 year old will understand that this technique is unlikely to work. And so it was that morning – I ranted, I cajoled, I threatened, I bribed.

Eventually, Joe stepped in and quietly, patiently and gently resolved the stand off. Suffice to say that while we all got out of the supermarket alive that day, it was a near thing.

What I learned that Saturday morning about leading others stayed with me throughout my career – getting the best from each situation as a leader will depend on being able to adapt your style while maintaining clarity of purpose. I learned that listening to others, coaching and empowering them and working together to solve problems was much more likely to deliver the required result. It doesn't mean I am not driven and ambitious – rather drawing on the power of others meant that we could achieve the results without a whole lot of negative energy burning everyone out!

Learning to adapt also applies to my career. Over the past 30 years, I have witnessed at least 3 financial market collapses, around 4 commodity boom-bust cycles, the rise of China as a major trading partner, the spread of global terrorism, the advent of social media, the development of sustainability as a core business principle and more Australian Prime Ministers than I care to mention.

In each case, it has been the ability to adapt and embrace change that has enabled me to survive, and provide clarity of

purpose and a sense of stability and order to others as a leader in an increasingly volatile world.

The changes over that time pale into insignificance when we look to the future. Change is the new order – the job you have today, or the way in which you do that job will unlikely exist in 10 years. Just like we could not have imagined 20 years ago people driving electric cars, or driverless trains, or robotic surgery or cognitive computing or Siri or Spotify, it is impossible for us to imagine what the jobs of the future will be.

What is clear is that those of you that will thrive are those who can adapt best to the global volatility and career uncertainty – both in your vocation and in your leadership of others. It is truly a test of “survival of the fittest.”

I agree with Bill Gates who said

“This is a fantastic time to be entering the business world, because business is going to change more in the next 10 years than it has in the last 50.”

I encourage you to embrace that change – own it, be part of it. View every step as a potential new challenge and an opportunity to learn and adapt. Give generously of your brain, your energy and your heart to every endeavour you choose – because I am certain there will be more than one. Love your failures as much as your successes – they enrich your life and make you who you are.

I am not here today because I have run the perfect race. Far from it. Rather, I have been prepared to push the

boundaries, to take risks and fail, then learn from those failures through self-reflection and renewal. I have adapted to the environmental factors that shaped my world and been willing to change direction and try a new path with many curves and twists.

And I encourage you to do the same. Be authentic...

don't fence yourself in; ...

stay hungry, don't settle and keep looking;

and embrace change - learn and adapt.

I wish for each of you a life of fulfilment and joy shared with others; painting your own rich canvas full of colour, depth, dimension..... and one which you reflect has been enriched by your time here at Curtin University.

Go well.

Thank you.