

Rhodes University 2009 Graduation Ceremonies Address

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It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this graduation ceremony, and to address you on this special occasion at which we recognize and celebrate the achievements of the students of Rhodes University.

Recognition

First and foremost, I wish to congratulate you, our students, on your tremendous achievement.

To be awarded a degree or diploma from Rhodes University entails dedicated endeavour. When you joined us you were told that at Rhodes learning and education is a partnership, a relationship of mutual commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, to the development of expertise and skills, and to the embrace of appropriate values and attitudes. Your graduation is testimony that you have fulfilled your side of the partnership. You have displayed the necessary commitment and willingness to learn, to acquire knowledge and to develop expertise. Your achievement, the fruits of many months and years of toil, is, ultimately, your own great accomplishment.

You will, I trust, however, acknowledge the contributions of your lecturers and tutors, of the laboratory and computer technicians, administrators, of wardens, cooks, cleaners and gardeners, all of whom have created a special intellectual, social and physical environment at Rhodes to support you and to enable you to succeed.

You will, hopefully, also recognize your parents, guardians, families and benefactors, all of whom have generously contributed to your receiving a Rhodes education and to your graduating this evening.

Challenges

My addresses at the 2007 and 2008 graduation ceremonies were delivered in conditions of strong economic growth in South Africa and promising prospects for our country and continent, and for our graduates.

Today, as we live through a severe global financial and economic crisis, the context is altogether different.

For the moment, state spending on public infrastructure and continued, if more modest economic growth in South Africa, mean that the outlook for graduates, and especially Rhodes graduates, remains promising.

As our graduates, you can also draw confidence in the worth of your Rhodes education and qualification, whether you are embarking on postgraduate studies or entering the world of work.

However, we would be burying our head in the sand if we were not to recognize that the

months and years ahead could be extremely challenging. Still, as I hope to show, among the dark clouds there could be silver lining.

‘Interesting times’

Although held to be Chinese, the origins of the phrase ‘May you live in interesting times’ is a matter of dispute. Also in dispute is whether the phrase is a blessing or a curse.

Be that as it may, what is certain is that currently we ‘live in interesting times’. ‘Interesting times’ could, however, be an understatement.

Perhaps, the memorable opening lines of Charles Dickens *A Tale of Two Cities* more accurately capture our current conditions.

Dickens writes:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times; it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness; it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity; it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness; it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair; we had everything before us, we had nothing before us.

The Global Crisis

We live today in an epoch that is termed globalization. Distinct from previous periods of history, under globalization there has been a massive world-wide ‘expansion of economic activities’, including companies designing their goods in one country but producing them in many other countries.

Also features of globalization are extensive and rapid ‘flows of (capital), services, technology, information and ideas across national boundaries’. Alongside, there has been the growth of a global consumer culture, symbolized by McDonald’s, Nike, Microsoft, MTV and the like.

What has made globalization possible is, of course, the huge increases in the speed of air and other travel, ‘the technological revolution in communications, the internet and large-scale computerized information systems’.

Barack Obama has averred that ‘As the world grows smaller, our common humanity shall reveal itself’. Amen, but will it?

Paradoxically, despite greater contact across regions, nations, cultures, religions and languages, and despite the world growing smaller, during recent decades there has been an all too evident closing of minds and hearts and negation of important human values.

The negation of core human values – respect for human dignity, difference and diversity, human rights and the oneness of humanity – and the closing of hearts have promoted destructive fundamentalisms of various kinds, intolerance and prejudice, and have made the world a much less just, safe and secure place.

The closing of the mind has been evident in economic and social thought and policies that have prevailed during the past twenty years. Wisdom derived from vigorous intellectual debate, knowledge, and understanding and the idea of public good have been disdained. Instead, self-serving ideas based on arrogant power and narrow economic interests have triumphed. The result has been dubious and pernicious economic and social orthodoxies that have slowly matured into the grave financial and economic crisis that envelopes the world today.

Instead of, as the Nobel prize-winning economist Amartya Sen puts it, 'development as human freedom', as 'a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy', human development has come to be reduced to 'growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance'.

Under the sway of the new economic and social orthodoxies a culture of unbridled individualism, greed and crass materialism has taken root, its mantra 'grab what you can and damn the rest'.

Rather than a concern with people, social equity and justice, in the new gilded age the unadulterated pursuit of power, self-interest, money, material wealth, profits, and performance bonuses have come to be the new gods.

What powerful economic and social groups have sowed during the past two decades, without any effective restraint and regulation, the whole world now reaps.

It takes courage to read the business pages of newspapers, for the ills and woes that they document make for dismal reading. Once-thriving economies, lauded only recently as great success stories, find themselves in perilous states.

In the United States and Europe, the bastions of capitalism, major financial institutions have been nationalized. Recall that not too long ago we were being warned against nationalising. Once blue chip companies have gone bust or are pleading cap-in-hand for government bail-outs.

Stories abound on the impact of the crisis on the poor, on pensions and savings, on job losses running into the millions and rising unemployment, with worse to come.

While we have been somewhat cushioned from the fallout, we are not immune to the effects of the crisis. Already, the job losses are mounting. As the sales of new cars plunge, in this province, one of the poorest in South Africa, the toll on automobile and automotive workers will be severe.

The crisis and slow down in economic activity mean that new work-seekers, including graduates of universities, face potentially difficult and uncertain times.

It is a sobering thought that those who have sown the global economic and financial malaise are the graduates of prestigious U.S. universities. These universities and particular academics have often had close, and perhaps too cosy, relationships with the financial companies that are today in the limelight for all the wrong reasons.

Judging by their actions, the MBA graduates of these outstanding universities, or as they are now being called, 'Masters of the Business Apocalypse', or 'Mediocre but Arrogant, or 'Me Before Anyone', seem to have had a higher education lacking in any deep engagement with issues of ethics and morality.

As universities we rush to embrace the adulation of our graduates. It is to be hoped that we will also reflect critically and deeply on our social purposes, values and shortcomings when our graduates contribute to plunging the world into financial and economic turmoil.

In Dickens' terms, the global financial and economic is 'the worst of times', an 'age of foolishness', an 'epoch of incredulity', 'the season of Darkness', 'the winter of despair' with 'nothing before us'.

And yet, the global crisis could also become 'the best of times', 'the age of wisdom', 'the epoch of belief, 'the season of Light, 'the spring of hope', a time when 'we have everything before us'.

If for good reasons communism was buried with the fall of the Berlin Wall exactly 20 years ago, for equally good reasons the recent events must also signal the demise of the

uncontrolled and soulless free-market capitalism to which humanity has been subject the past 20 years.

The current crisis therefore provides the opportunity for a new imagination that is freed from the stifling and dangerous orthodoxies of the past decades. 'We need to rekindle our capacity to imagine, and to see through the still-gathering storm to what lies beyond'.

It creates the space for new ideas, and for the recovery of important values related to human development, justice, solidarity, freedom and internationalism.

It enables us to think about and act to construct a different kind of world and different kind of citizenship, 'a world where markets are servants, not masters'.

Whether and to what extent this happens, whether amidst these 'worst of times' and 'winter of despair' we move into 'the spring of hope' with 'everything before us' depends on us.

It depends on whether, as intellectuals and scholars, as graduates and citizens, and as universities and government's we take on the responsibility of re-thinking and re-making our world and our societies on the basis of a different compass, other principles, coordinates and logics than the ones that have dominated in recent decades.

This new logic must first and foremost put human development, people's needs, justice and human rights at the centre of all our thinking and actions.

It must more greatly appreciate, respect, and affirm difference and diversity related to race, gender, language and culture as well-springs of social vitality and strength.

It must embrace the idea that we have inherited the earth in safe-keeping for future generations and must abandon the reckless degradation of our environment in the name of 'progress' and 'development'.

The orthodoxies of the last two decades have been especially harmful to how we think about the value, purposes and goals of universities, and about education and knowledge. They have also sought to reduce universities to simply training schools designed to produce technicians and technocrats and instruments of the economy and businesses.

The new logic must revalue knowledge and education as cornerstones of human development and restore to universities their important, diverse and varied social purposes. The new logic must also prise open minds and hearts that have been closed to all needs other than those of their own.

Responsibilities

As graduates you have had the honour of studying at a very special and distinctive university. A university that deservedly commands an enviable academic reputation; a university that seeks to be an institution 'where leaders learn', a university that seeks to be true to its motto: 'Vis, Virtus, Veritas - 'Strength, Virtue, Truth'.

With your graduation you stand on the threshold of a new and exciting life, a life which, as a leader, you understand also brings with it obligations and responsibilities.

We stand, I believe, potentially at the threshold of one of the great transitions of human history, where the old is in tatters and the new is struggling to be born.

As leaders, you should be able to embrace the principles and new logic that I suggest must govern our society and world, if we are to move into 'the age of wisdom', into 'the spring of hope'.

Indeed, you should be the ambassadors of these principles and new logic and the catalysts of a new 'age of wisdom', 'epoch of belief, and 'season of Light.

Armed with knowledge and expertise your adventure is to exercise, with humility, leadership wherever you find yourself – in the classrooms and schools of our lands; in hospital and clinic dispensaries; in legal practices, prosecution offices and courts; in research institutions and scientific laboratories; in universities and media, and in financial and public services. As enlightened, ethical, critical and compassionate citizens, you understand that leadership is not a function of material wealth, high office or status, but of truth, imagination, creativity, striving for perfection and commitment to people and responsibilities.

As leaders you are also well-aware, unlike the MBAs of some supposedly outstanding universities, that your knowledge and expertise must be put to work not only for your private benefit but also for the benefit of society at large. Above all, you understand that the status of leader is not bestowed by a degree or qualification but is one that must be earned through impeccable integrity, visionary endeavour and selfless public service.

It is our hope that in the years ahead the Rhodes values of ‘Strength, Virtue, Truth’ will guide your conduct and animate your existence:

- That you will pursue the Truth that derives from knowledge, understanding, reason, and from intellectual debate and the open and respectful clash of ideas
- That you will embody the Virtue of imagination, creativity, perseverance, respect for human dignity, human rights, social justice and social compassion, and
- That you will always possess the Strength of courage to ‘speak truth to power’, when those in power must be reminded of their obligations and responsibilities; when they must be criticized for failings in public leadership and morality; when they must be rebuked for their disdainful treatment of citizens, who instead of Batho Pele (People first) are subject in many parts of the civil service to a culture of Batho Morago (People last), and when they must be warned against obliterating the fundamentally important distinctions between political party, government and state, and cautioned against using public offices for private accumulation and gain.

In Closing

Over 3 days, 1841 students will graduate at 5 graduation ceremonies. 61% are women. 486 are international students from 20 countries in the rest of Africa. 36 are from Europe, 9 from North and South America and 5 from Asia.

This is a tremendous contribution by Rhodes University to the intellectual base of South Africa and other countries.

The knowledge, expertise and skills that you graduate with today make you, each and every one of you, immensely precious and vital people who are capable of making a powerful contribution to our society.

I hope that each of you will, in your in our own way, use your capabilities to help to ensure that our future is indeed a time when ‘we have everything before us’.

Tonight is your night, to remember, to celebrate and cherish. No doubt the parties will extend long into the night. You have earned it and I wish you a wonderful and joyful night of celebration of your achievement and your future promise.