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GRADUATION SPEECH, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we meet today. I'd also like to pay my respects to Elders past and present.

Acknowledge:

- Mr Jim McDowell, Chancellor;
- Professor David Lloyd Vice Chancellor and President;
- Members of the University Council;
- Doctors, Emeritus Professors, Fellows, and Senior Management and staff of the University;
- Graduates.

Ladies and Gentlemen, it's a real pleasure to be here to celebrate the University of South Australia's Graduation Day. Many congratulations to all the students who are graduating; but also to the parents for raising all the bright and brilliant individuals that I see before me, who will no doubt go onto make a major contribution to this city, this State, this wonderful country of Australia. You should all be feeling very proud.

Now when your Chancellor, Jim McDowell, first asked if I would be prepared to make a speech at one of your graduation ceremonies, I agreed readily enough. It sounded fun. Then I read the small print. 1200 people, he said. Something inspiring, he said. I started to feel mildly intimidated. Then I made the mistake of watching the video of Tim Minchin speaking at a graduation ceremony at the University of Western Australia. This brought about total writer's block, since I knew that I could never be as brilliant, as funny, as insightful as Tim.

So I turned to my 16 year old daughter for help. Another big mistake. Every thought I had for inspiring a large group of young graduates and their families was dismissed as lame. Or totally lame. I asked her humbly for some advice. Well, she said. Think what would have helped you most at that stage in your life. Put yourself in their shoes. What do you wish you'd known then that you know now?

I've thought about that a lot, and landed on three things I've learned in particular, gleaned from a 27 year career in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, postings in six different countries, becoming a wife and a mum of three along the way. They are simple things that, if I had understood them when I was graduating from the London School of Economics back in 1989, might have eased my life journey a little – not that it's been a hard or horrid one by any means; and given me something I lacked terribly for a long time – the gift of self-confidence.

The first life learning point is that **perfection is over-rated**. As someone called Harriet Bralker puts it: “Striving for excellence motivates you; striving for perfection is demoralising.”

I realise now that I was a perfectionist as child and as a young adult. At school, I always thought I'd done terribly in exams, because I focused too hard on the things I didn't know or hadn't got right, rather than noticing the bits that had gone really well. At university, I couldn't find my voice in tutorials, because I thought that everyone else was much cleverer than me, and that my own contribution would add little value. When I started my career in the UK Diplomatic Service, aged 21, these feelings intensified into something I now recognise as 'imposter syndrome' – feeling like I was a fraud for being there at all.

Happily, it turns out I'm not the only person who feels this way – in fact many people, women in particular, have acknowledged a similar trait. And some of them have been perfectly successful. The British actress, Kate Winslet, has said:

“Sometimes I wake up in the morning before going off to a shoot, and I think, I can't do this, I'm a fraud.”

Dr Margaret Chan, Chief of the World Health Organisation, has said:

“There are an awful lot of people out there who think I'm an expert. How do these people believe all this about me? I'm so much aware of all the things I don't know.”

So we imposters are in some great company!

I'm glad to say that my self-confidence and self-belief have increased over time; but even in my approach to this speech I can see echoes of my old paralysed perfectionist self. Clearly I can't just prepare a graduation speech: it needs to be as good as Tim Minchin's!! And I need to get my 16 year old daughter to say it's brilliant!! So the old traps are still there – the difference is I am more aware of them and able to carry on regardless.

One phrase I come back to time and time again, that I'd like you to think about, is: **don't let the best be the enemy of the good**. This phrase was uttered to me about 18 years ago by one of my bosses, and I repeat it to myself like a mantra when I am stuck in the shackles of perfectionism. And I now use it to encourage people in my team to write stuff down, to think about ends not means, and just to have a go.

It may not be perfect, but sometimes – or indeed quite often – good enough will do. And knowing that can set us free.

My second learning point is linked to this too, which is: **go ahead and make mistakes. But learn from them.**

Why so? Because if we don't make mistakes then we're probably not taking enough risk, or stretching ourselves. And fear of failure can become as paralyzing as that search for perfection.

But mistakes give us the opportunity to learn and to improve.

Overcoming setbacks builds resilience. We can all think of stories of athletes or inventors who failed repeatedly before attaining their dreams, revealing the integral role failure plays in success.

I'll illustrate this with a true story, which at the time had a potential to be a CLM – Career Limiting Move.

Wind the clock back 20 years and you'd find me, a junior official, sitting at a top-level government meeting. In the Chair was Robin Cook, the British Foreign Secretary (and sadly no longer with us).

Around the table were other ministers, top officials, and my boss.

They were discussing human rights in Bosnia just after the war in the Balkans, and I was there because this was one of the countries I covered.

I'd sat timidly in the back row of the meeting rather than at the table (first mistake). I was day-dreaming rather than listening to the conversation (second mistake). So when a senior official (called Fiona) said, "I was talking to Menna the other day and she's got some thoughts on this", I jumped - then realised I had absolutely no idea what everyone was talking about.

The whole room turned to look at me, as I sat and went bright red with my mouth falling open and I stuttered something incoherent.

Robin Cook said (and I like to think he meant it kindly): “I don’t think Menna thinks she’s got anything to say about this”. Never had I wanted the floor to open up and swallow me more than at that moment. Soon everyone returned to the conversation and I was stuck sitting there until the meeting had ended and I scuttled away.

What did I learn from this self-inflicted feast of embarrassment?

1. If you’re in a meeting, pay attention and listen, even if you don’t think you’ll be called on to speak.
2. Don’t slink around in the back row – you have as much right to be there as everyone else.
3. Be kind to others who make mistakes. Afterwards, my boss called me in – and I was sure I was about to be fired. Instead, he said how ridiculous it had been for Fiona to throw me under the bus like that without warning. She should have told you, he fumed,

that she was going to ask for your views. I can't tell you how relieved and grateful to him I was; which showed the value of your boss always having your back (even if he thinks you're an idiot) and giving you permission to be human and get some things wrong.

Another observation I have on this is that I can remember it all, 20 years later. I remember the rest of my time in that London job in black and white, in permanent soft focus, with the specifics rubbed away by the passage of time. But this memory is as sharp and as clear as if it were yesterday; and in glorious technicolour. So, yes, our failures are seared on our minds, but so is the learning.

It's certainly true, in my experience, that we learn more – much more - from our mistakes than our successes. If I'd known that at your stage in life, I might have worried less about getting things wrong, and focused more on taking risks and enjoying the ride.

And this takes me to my **third and final life learning point**.

If life is a water park ride (and bear with me, because I'm going to stretch this metaphor to destruction..!), it's definitely a lazy river. You know when you go to the water park on a hot summer's day; you climb into an inner tube; and off you go, drifting around a meandering course. It can feel a bit slow at times, but it is also incredibly relaxing. Then you turn a corner and there's a waterfall hitting you on the head or a section of gentle rapids. You might fall out and clamber back in again. Or just swim for a bit.

When I started out on my career, I was in a rush. Sometimes – often, my family would say - I still am. I'm paddling like crazy through that river, splashing those around me, forgetting to admire the view or live in the moment. Yes it's fun, great fun; but it can be quite exhausting.

So my message to my younger and older self is: slow down and enjoy the ride. Life goes fast – why hurry it along even more? Your parents will know how fast and, like me, marvel at the acceleration of time, so that life looked at backwards feels like a short time-lapse video. So you need to make the most of it.

And go ahead and define your own course. Don't be constrained by that lazy river – break out and make your own journey through life, being open to new opportunities and possibilities. For me, that has meant travelling extensively; and I hope that will feature for many of you too, as it gives us a chance to see the rich diversity of our world and understand different countries, cultures and ways of life.

You may or may not change the world; but seeing more of it will change you. It will also give you a wide range of experiences and memories to slot into your own time-lapse video, when the moment comes. My eldest daughter (aged 19) is currently on a gap year, and is as I speak in Cambodia on the last leg of a back-packing trip around South East Asia. I face-timed her at the weekend, and I saw in her face the exuberance of travel, of being in new and beautiful places, of meeting new friends. I'm sure there's lots she's not telling me of course (!) – and that's as it should be and absolutely fine; but I took great pleasure from seeing her so happy and experiencing for herself the joy of travel, as I have done throughout my life. For parents out there, this can also be hard – but ultimately, as we all know, our children are only lent to us. As Khalil Gibran wrote:

“Your children are not your children. They are the sons and daughters of life's longing for itself. They come through you but not from you, and though they are with you they belong not to you.”

On that note, I wish all today's graduates the very best as you embark on the road – or the river - beyond the University of South Australia.

In a nutshell: perfection is over-rated; mistakes are a must; enjoy the ride; travel well.

Thank you for your attention today.