

## **Occasional address, University of South Australia Graduation, March 2015.**

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As you all stood just then and clapped your parents and friends for supporting you through this journey, I couldn't help but be reminded of a colony of emperor penguins – with your special hats and lovely black gowns, shuffling together, clapping away. Addressing a colony of emperor penguins is a less daunting task than addressing a few hundred clever, committed and courageous people. Well I presume it is, having never actually done the former.

It is a rather ridiculous and impractical outfit though isn't it? Somewhat resembling those gowns one wears in hospital. Tying up at the back so that no matter how tightly you do them up, they will show just enough of your bottom to embarrass you in the walk across the waiting room. There are iconic photographs of Oxbridge graduates riding their bikes in these black gowns. Well I can tell you, from first hand experience, that riding your bike in one of these gowns is a bad idea. In my years at Oxford, I saw many people walking their bike in such gowns but never, once, riding it. I can also tell you that these hats do not accommodate a helmet very well. Perhaps some of the more astonishing floppy hats you can see in the menagerie of colourfully-hatted clever people beside me would be more appropriate, but no less silly-looking, for this endeavour.

It is actually perfectly proper to look this kind of ridiculous on this kind of day. Today, you wear this gown and hat in the company of your friends – your comrades on the journey - and for many of you, your very proud family. And you wear this gown and hat alongside those of us up here, your proud lecturers, supervisors and advisors – we actually *choose* to dress up like this in honour of

you. But we also wear this gear in honour of something much grander and solemn.

Of course, you are all to be congratulated: you have already achieved what the vast majority of our species will not; you now have more than twice the years of formal education than the average human. But here is the rub – this incredible fortune is due in a large part to exactly that – fortune. Luck. We should never forget that. We should, in fact, intentionally *remember* that. What you have done with your luck comes down, I believe, to your choices. To paraphrase a young single mother doing it tough in Edinburgh in the 1990's, writing through the mind of an old but indefatigable wizard 'It is our choices far more than our abilities, Harry, that make us who we really are'. I suspect that Dumbledore was more elegant than my paraphrased version suggests, but hopefully his message remains clear.

How do our choices relate to the more solemn cargo of the gown and the hat? Well, each of you now has an even greater capacity to make good choices – when much has been achieved, much will be demanded. Each of you has access to a vast amount of information, exponentially greater than it was even when you began your degree, and advanced skills in accessing, synthesizing, evaluating and applying that information. What a privilege this is, but with it comes profound responsibility. I believe that, by becoming members of 'The highly educated', marked today with gown and hat, comes an obligation to your communities, to your societies, indeed to your species, to return on your substantial fortune and investment. Now more than ever, you have no excuse to settle for ordinary. Now more than ever, extraordinary is a challenge you are obliged to take on.

Your journey herein is likely to be exhilarating, terrifying, hilarious, horrible and magnificent. How you negotiate it will, as Dumbledore says, depend greatly on your choices. So how does one make good choices? I suspect that Dumbledore would start by counselling us to know who we really are. I do not mean knowing our favourite food, first pet and mother's maiden name. I mean knowing our core, non-negotiable values. Truth? Happiness? Family? Health? Trust? Wealth? Intelligence? Courage? This is not a trivial task – you must sort through the muck they lie beneath, and identify the things you hold most dear – the very guts of you – lying, sometimes hiding, deep in 'the marrow of your bones'. Do this and the rest might be relatively simple – just choose, in every instance, to keep those values safe.

You are all health science graduates. So am I. There are clearly no better looking or more enlightened graduates on campus - nothing like a group of health science graduates to make a middle aged bald man like me put buy a nice shirt and don the gown and the hat. There has actually been no better time to become a health scientist –the rapid advances in our understanding of human biology are continually opening up new opportunities to improve the human condition. Some of the most exciting advances in my field highlight the power of the health professional. The power, effectively, of you. You matter. You matter to the clients you really like, and to the clients you really don't. You matter even to the clients you feel under-resourced to help. How you interact with your clients will immediately and sometimes profoundly alter their brain and therefore their entire biology. You plant yourself as a neural representation inside their skull – a cortical prosthesis embedded, perhaps, for life. Just think how remarkable this really is. It is not just what you do, but how you do it. It is not just what you say, but how you say it. How you greet them, farewell them, look at them and listen to them. Try your darndest to do these things *extraordinarily* well. From the

perspective of a neuroscientist, still in love with the fearful and wonderful complexity of the human, there is no more important task than to do these things well. And I am completely confident you will be very pleased you did.

And with that I wish you all the very best for rest of your journey.

Congratulations and thank you.