

Speech to Graduates by Dr Jonathan Gerber 25 September 2008

Vice-Chancellor, members of the University, fellow graduates and guests,

To quote Joseph Conrad, “To be spoken well of is an ambition fit for noble souls, but also a profitable one for an exceptionally intelligent scoundrel.”

On this occasion, I would like to offer thanks on behalf of the graduands, and also offer some reflections on Conrad’s words. For today the graduands are well spoken of, nobles’ souls or intelligent scoundrels as the case may be. And today is a day of celebration for at least two important reasons.

First, we have overcome challenges to stand here today. I spent my doctoral years studying rejection and learnt that even simple rejection experiences such as not having phone calls returned or being left out of a game can profoundly affect core human needs such as belonging and, to a greater extent, control. Study can similarly challenge our sense of belonging and our sense of control, whether it is time not spent with loved ones, having articles rejected, or testing our character to see if we have what it takes. Today we celebrate overcoming these various challenges, and we recognise that many of them had costs borne not by us but by those around us. For your understanding when we have been self-absorbed we are grateful. For helping the more absent-minded among us we thank you. And we share the honours we are receiving today with you.

This brings me to the second, and no less important, reason for celebrating: we have caring relationships around us. We belong. Some of our family, partners and friends are here to watch us graduate. Our supervisors, these mentors who have gradually accepted us as colleagues and friends are also here. And we thank you all for sharing this occasion with us.

I imagine most of the graduands will reflect on today in future years. And I wonder if in future years I will take for granted the people who were here today and instead focus on the achievements we celebrate today. The danger in this is that pursuing prestige is unlikely to be satisfying in the long-run. For example, people who directly pursue feeling good tend to rationalise failures instead of learning why they failed. Over time, this leads to poorer performance and, in turn, feeling worse about yourself.

Conrad’s character Nostromo relentlessly pursued prestige. He spent considerable time and effort gaining the respect of those around him, and was rewarded with the admiration of his townsfolk. However, when events conspired to force Nostromo to hide on an island his good feelings collapsed.

To quote Conrad:“(Nostromo) remained rich in glory and reputation. But since it was no longer possible for him to parade the streets of the town, and be hailed with respect in the usual haunts of his leisure, this sailor felt himself destitute indeed.”

So today, we, the graduands appreciate you being here to celebrate with us. We are not here merely to gain prestige, but to celebrate overcoming challenges and the joys of relationships. We, the graduands, feel humbled by

your praise and happy that we can celebrate it with you, our family, friends and colleagues. We have been isolated on an island, we are back. We know you are proud of us, and we thank you for all your support. Most importantly, we hope to see more of you in the future.

Thankyou.

Dr Jonathan Gerber 25 September 2008