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Arts & Engineering
Graduation Ceremony
Guest Speech**

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Respected Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, honoured guests and fellow learners, it is my privilege to be asked to give this talk.

I have given many keynote and plenary talks, and I have given hundreds of lectures. But this is different – I am essentially addressing a group of assembled graduands who come from the different disciplines of arts and engineering and aspire to achieve different things in their lives. However, they have all gone through a common process of education for serving the society they live in and to become better human beings. Today I will try to discuss some aspects of education and its purpose in life.

Education has been valued throughout the history of mankind and at the same time different methods of education have been acknowledged. Proper education opens up your mind to see and understand the variety of life. According to Plato's Republic "The object of education is to turn the eye which the soul already possesses to the light. The whole function of education is not to put knowledge into the soul, but to bring out the best things that are latent in the soul." A vital side of education involves a teacher whose prime responsibility should be to have faith in the inherent potential of each and every student and to help them realise this potential. An ideal teacher is supposed to be a friend, a philosopher and a guide. Today each of you will be receiving a degree that might be viewed by some as the culmination of an education process, but that is not the case. I will urge you to think it as a gateway to your future life.

You have all gone through a process which has prepared you better for the situations that you will face in day-to-day life, irrespective of your profession or style of living. To quote Vivekananda, a nineteenth century Indian philosopher, "We are responsible for what we are and whatever we wish ourselves to be - we have the power to make ourselves ... so we have to know how to act." This applies to all of us. Education has given you the ability to differentiate between what you know and what you don't, what you should do and what you shouldn't. At the same time, as Aristotle said "It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it." So, what am I trying to convey here? In my opinion, you should not accept everything meekly - it should be your prerogative to challenge others logically without, of course, being malicious. You are about to graduate to a new life - from now on most of you will work with other people, both known and unknown, good and bad, and will have to make judicious decisions. Education has only created the foundation for you to think rationally, but your whole life will be a learning process, not necessarily through the pages of the books but through various experiences that you will have by interacting with others. It is worth remembering what the wise people have advised us. Interestingly, Confucius said "If I am walking with two other men, each of them will serve as my teacher. I will pick out the good points of the one and imitate those, and the bad points of the other and correct them in myself." It is a very good advice indeed!

I am almost at the end of my career but still feel overwhelmed to receive the honorary 'Doctor of Engineering' degree from this university – thank you very much for considering me for this honour. However, the credit actually belongs to my family, friends, colleagues and the students who have helped me in achieving whatever I have achieved in life. Similarly I will remind you as well to be thankful to parents, relatives, friends, or whoever has helped you in reaching this significant milestone.

A few minutes ago I was talking about teachers and their roles – let me give you some examples from my personal life. When I think about a teacher, I think of my own research supervisor, Professor Bob Brown, at the University of Western Australia. Bob had a profound influence on my career and my thinking process. He used to teach a postgraduate course on 'History of Technology' where he lectured on the theory of logic and our basic process of drawing conclusions from an array of facts. Of course, conclusions often require assumptions on the boundary conditions and involve subjective judgement. However, notwithstanding these, there is a fundamental process of drawing conclusions if the information is properly laid out. A real application of it came when an opportunity arose for moving to Auckland - I still vividly remember the day when Bob produced a sheet of paper listing the pros and cons of the move with individualised weighting factors. I had a 3-year old daughter and my wife was on the verge of starting a PhD in mathematics – so it was really a tough decision – with a lot of risk. Bob's unemotional and logical approach was impressive and really taught me a lesson on the decision making process.

However, a logical approach is not the only entity worth cultivating in life. Empathy towards others is a foundation stone for leading a successful life. To give you an example I will recall the case of a very bright PhD student. Normally the bright students need very little day-to-day academic supervision but often they require emotional support. This particular student had a terrible childhood after witnessing his father murdering his mother with a kitchen knife, and used to suffer from severe mood swings. This was unknown to all of us, including the technical staff in the laboratory as well. The problems created by this almost resulted in the student abandoning his PhD. However, as the student did his undergraduate project under my supervision, he probably developed some faith in me. So one day he confided in me and told the whole story. I immediately helped him seek professional counselling and did whatever I could do to protect his candidature and improve the situation. Anyway, eventually it worked out well – he successfully completed his thesis with distinction - and I even ended up counselling his sister, who had similar problems. On another occasion (on a slightly lighter note), I had to have dinner with my student's mother-in-law – my job was to convince her not to interfere in her son-in-law's education. I am thankful to my wife for the help she provided because I can assure you that it was a tough job. In fact, we finally decided to convince my student's wife rather than her mother, who had a difficult personality. So, you see, even a normally sedate academic life can have challenging emotional issues.

We must try to appreciate the enriching and at times funny sides of our jobs – that is the advice I would like to give you today although I know it is easier said than done.

As a teacher I have learnt a lot from my students, particularly the research students. They always make you think, expand your sphere of knowledge and interpret difficult situations. That is why, even after so many years I love teaching and interacting with students. They rejuvenate me – I prefer having lunch with the students rather than putting myself in a corner with my senior colleagues discussing some questionable serious matters. Please do not misunderstand me: those discussions are also necessary but education is a learning process made successful by students and teachers together, and I hope you felt that way during your student days. You are young and may not appreciate now some of the things that you have learnt but I can assure you that they will stand you in good stead in the future. I would like to finish this talk with a translation from Upanishad, a condensed source of knowledge collated about 2000 years B.C. in India – it is a prayer involving the teacher and the learner. It says “May the Almighty protect us both and bestow upon us the fruit of knowledge. May we both obtain energy to acquire knowledge. May what we both study reveal the truth. May we cherish no evil feeling towards each other. Let there be peace, peace, peace!”

Thank you.