

GRADUATION SPEECH

Dawn Albery

January 2010

Members of the faculty, parents, guests, and graduates, greetings! Dobrý den!

Graduation is a great achievement and a profound time of change and possibility. As such, giving a speech at a graduation is an honour and an important responsibility, of which I am acutely aware and really delighted to be here. I am also aware that, on a day of such high excitement, what you require of any speaker, first and foremost, is brevity. I hope not to fail you in this respect.

With that imperative in mind, there are two sets of reflections I want to share with you, embedded in the longer journey of life you commenced many years ago. The first relates to that part of the journey you have just completed as students, and the second to that part of the journey on which you are now embarking, as graduates and practitioners.

In the middle of the twentieth century, sociologist Kurt Lewin observed that “There is nothing so practical as a good theory”. What he meant by this, of course, is that a theory is “good” to the extent that it helps us to understand, explain and predict reality. Whether you were aware of it or not, one of the purposes of undertaking your programme of study was to arm you with a set of relevant theories – a set of relevant theories not simply as a base of knowledge, but as a base of understanding and a capacity for application. One test of those theories, and you as practitioners, is the extent to which you are able to effectively apply the theories to the world of your work.

At this point in your journey then, you have arrived at the station of knowing and understanding as newly minted practitioners.

As you embark on this next part of your journey, your respective toolkit in hands, you have to decide how to use these tools with which you have been equipped. Some would go further, and argue that you have a moral responsibility to use the opportunities with which you have been presented to help make the world a better place, not just for you but for others as well, and especially for those less fortunate. I for one am happy to admit that I subscribe to this view, but I also realize this is really a question of ethics and personal responsibility, over which reasonable people can disagree.

Nonetheless, in his Preface to the United Nations *World Economic and Social Survey 2006*, the United Nations Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, observed:

Our world is richer than ever before, but it is also marked by enormous inequalities, both within and between countries. The average annual income of someone living in the world’s richest country, Luxembourg, is more than one hundred times larger than that of the average citizen of Sierra Leone, one of the world’s poorest. Such big differences in living standards should be a matter of great concern, because they reflect serious inequalities in life opportunities. This calls for a robust policy response at both the national and international levels, so that all countries can achieve the Millennium Development Goals and other agreed development objectives.

Some years earlier, at the World Economic Forum in 1999, Annan had challenged business leaders to join the Global Compact – an international initiative to promote responsible corporate citizenship so that business can be part of the solution to the challenges of globalisation in the areas of human rights, labour, the environment and anti-corruption in order to create a more sustainable and inclusive global economy. Around the world now, companies are seeking to integrate social and environmental concerns in their business operations, investing more in their people, the environment and their relations with stakeholders.

But it is not simply a case of another set of guidelines or a cleverly worded code of conduct statement, which have done little to effect a higher standard of behaviour in financial services industries around the world. A comment by Chris Davis, a British Member of the European Parliament (MEP), regarding problems of financial transparency within the European Parliament is instructive:

“The financial rules in the European Parliament are complicated and even seem designed to discourage ethical behaviour,” he said. “But you would expect British MEPs to know right from wrong.”

Just as we expect our politicians to know, is it any less reasonable to expect corporate executives to know right from wrong?

My challenge to you then is to ask you to decide which path you will choose – whether you will be using your talents, your understanding and your opportunities to simply make the world a better place for yourself, or whether you will join the ranks of responsible corporate citizens who understand and enact a view that economic values and human values are mutually reinforcing. Will you be one of those who simply follows the rules, adhering to the codes of conduct of the day, or will you enact the kind of principled behaviour that we should reasonably expect of the executives of our corporate entities?

We cannot know on this day how many of you will choose the latter ways and how many will not. You are young and it is not given to us to see your future. But I will tell you this, Nottingham Trent University can wish for no higher compliment than that in the future it will be reported your graduating class was populated by reflective, responsible practitioners who worked to make the world a better place for everyone.

Thank you, and congratulations from everyone at Nottingham Trent University.