

GRADUATION SPEECH DECEMBER 17TH

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Chancellor and Faculty, graduates and families and friends. Graduates, everyone in this Great Hall is delighted to see you graduate today. We all wish you well.

I congratulate you, and I congratulate your parents, partners and families, the ones for whom today is the culmination of years of effort and often sacrifice – doing without your time and attention as well as making financial sacrifices. There will be children here for whom your PhD was not a welcome endeavour, and who are as glad as you are to see the end of it!

The American political satirist Russell Baker said at the start of a graduation address, “The graduation speaker tells the graduates to go forth into the world, then gives advice on what to do when they get out there. This is a ridiculous waste of time. Graduates never take advice, as I have learned from long experience. But (if you want it) the best advice I can give anybody about going out into the world is this: Don't do it. I have been out there. It is a mess.”

So absolutely no advice from me today! Instead I offer you observations from – now how can I put this delicately – near the end of my career as you commence yours!

When I look at my own career and at the careers of the people who

graduated with me, two things stand out. The first is that those who had clear goals often achieved them. Goals are big and serve to express our values – the things we prize and build our lives around. Goals include making a contribution to the improvement of Indigenous health or unravelling an important but puzzling field in molecular biology. Goals have to do with your sense of purpose. They matter. They energise. They create opportunities.

But plans don't matter anywhere near as much as goals. This is my second observation. Yes, plans are important matters of detail, usually about what we are aiming to do now and in the near future. Plans are means to ends. Plans are maps. BUT plans are usually made of paper and fall apart in the rain or absence of rain: ask a wheat farmer or for that matter ask Ricky Ponting! In my life when plans came apart, often something better was the cause. I have seen this happen with colleagues. When one plan disintegrated, nevertheless they reached their goal, which remained clear, by a new, more interesting, imaginative route.

Let me give you a three examples from my own life.

In 1967 I was completing my second year as an intern at Royal North Shore Hospital in Sydney. My goal was to train as a physician. Then – boom! – a friend in Papua New Guinea who worked in a mission station wrote to me and asked if I would consider filling in for a year – 1968 – between permanent doctors at a hospital in Baiyer River in the western highlands. Why not? I thought. Colleagues said to me, “You're crazy! Stick with your original plan! North Shore won't have you back when you've finished your adventure! You're stuffing your

career!” Well, I spent 1968 in Papua New Guinea and in 1969 North Shore did take me back as a registrar and I trained as a physician.

That change of plans in 1968, that year of apparent detour, showed me what amazing things you can do with preventive medicine. My predecessors in Papua New Guinea had immunised the local Enga children. When a whooping cough epidemic struck our valley in September, our children were safe. None of the children among the 14,000 people in our area got sick. But our hospital was inundated with children with whooping cough from other highland villages, from outside our catchment area, several of whom died.

Because of the circumstances of that year I developed a lifelong interest in population research. There was a lot of chronic respiratory disease in the highlands, not due to tobacco smoke but possibly due to early infections and smoke pollution in the huts. At a medical conference that year Richard Lovell, then professor of medicine at Melbourne, took an interest in me and said, “Why don’t you do epidemiology?” I wasn’t sure what that was, but it sounded good. Back in Sydney this led to my PhD project. I trained as an epidemiologist.

Please note that **NONE** of this was on my 1967 plan – none of it! In a few short years the plan for reaching my overall career goal had taken a direction I had never anticipated, even though the overall goal itself of wanting to be a useful physician remained steadfast.

Let me give you another example. In 1975, as a postdoctoral student working at McMaster University in Canada, I was one day contacted as from nowhere by David Maddison, the founding dean of a new medical

school in Newcastle, New South Wales, to ask if I would do two things – contribute to a brand new medical curriculum: based on problem solving that engaged students with the community; and, initiate programs in community based research.

Even though I had absolutely no knowledge of this option when I began my post-doc I did have a strong interest in medical education and public health and this combination was irresistible. A goal to contribute to the development of medical education led to my plan to go to Canada because McMaster was a leader in medical education and clinical epidemiology. But in a year I was back in Australia pursuing my goal but with an entirely different plan.

The landscape of the rest of my career is equally littered with damp plans that fell apart. In 2003 my family and I were planning to leave for Boston where I was going to work at Harvard with Jeffrey Sachs, a leading macroeconomist with a passion about poverty, on the economics of health in developing countries.

Three months before we were due to leave Sydney he wrote apologising that he had just moved to Columbia University in New York and perhaps therefore we might not wish to join him. Imagine anyone apologising for moving to New York!

Anyway, it took me all of three microseconds to compose a response. ‘Jeff,’ I said, ‘Don’t worry! We’ll come to New York, too!’ We did and it proved to be a truly wonderful eighteen months. The work on heart disease in the developing world was done, but quite differently, and with different co-workers, and new friends, in ways that I

had not anticipated. On the personal side, in New York with its pressure to perform and reach your potential, all our family benefited from the stimulus of that great and excellent city. For example it advanced my interest in writing poetry.

Now my point is this. An overarching goal is essential because if you don't know where you're going any road will take you there. But don't put on blinkers and get too locked into following just one of the many road plans or road maps that will take you to your overarching goal. Certainly you do need a plan, just as you need a grocery list when you go food shopping. But be open to the possibility that when you get to the supermarket items may be on sale that are more attractive and useful than those you had on your list.

Look at the lives of achievers and contributors to society; take time to read their biographies and autobiographies; make careful note of how they have coped when chance disrupted their plans. American theologian William F. May (as quoted by Professor Michael Sandel in his 2009 Reith Lectures) speaks of “openness to the unbidden”. In that resonant phrase – openness to the unbidden – he means a quality of open-mindedness about the things that occur in our lives by chance. Such openness – almost a whimsical welcome to, and anticipation of, the unbidden – has led to outstanding scientific discoveries. It also keeps us humble and stops us from falsely imagining that we are masters of the universe. The roll of the dice of chance can of course sometimes be unnerving and distressing and not everything that happened by chance to my colleagues or to me has helped us achieve our goals.

But in the vast majority of cases when your career road map presents you

with an unexpected turn, do not reject it. Welcome it and check it out. Chance may be throwing the ball to you and inviting you to imagine something different and showing you how, under changed circumstances, you may press towards your goal. It can give you new freedom and fresh energy.

If you are open to the unbidden, great things can happen to you and for you. I hope they do!

Bon voyage!