

April 2017

Occasional talk, University of Canberra Graduation

Thank you Acting Vice Chancellor.

After being invited to talk to you I met with Professor Lawrence Pratchett to discuss what words of wisdom and inspiration I might impart to you on this august occasion. After I told him a bit about myself, my studies and my career, he said to me in his wise, calm way, “I think you should call your talk ‘My life as a failure’.”

Naturally I was a little taken aback. Not just because he had been able to peer into my soul but because failure had been one of the three themes I had already planned to talk to you about.

After going home, and having a good cry, I decided to stick with my original plan to tell you assembled hopeful, shiny new graduates that

1. You are all going to fail, and
2. You are all going to die,
3. So the best thing to do is to move ever upwards because there is gold at the top and as we all know, gold is what really matters.

Failure

You lucky people are entering or re-entering a world and world of work that is undergoing remarkably rapid change. There is a good chance that we are at the inflexion point of an exponential rate of change – and that the future of work is one that will look quite different to that of today. So your best laid plans for your career may go awry but don't let this dishearten you. Personally I am quite looking forward to becoming a cyborg but there is likely to be a lot of disruption associated with the fourth industrial revolution – unless we learn the lessons from history and take steps to minimise unnecessary social pain.

My first career choice was made when I was 13 and I discovered psychology. I became absolutely determined that this was what I would do with my life. I couldn't believe that I could get paid to rummage around inside people's heads. My interest led me to study psychology as an undergraduate. The next step would have been a masters in clinical psychology but by then I had figured out that I was neither patient nor kind enough to be a clinical psyche so I decided to do a PhD instead. Sadly, about three days into my preparations, I realised that I could not bear to spend four years focussed on a tiny facet of something as broad

and interesting as the field of the human behaviour. So there I was – with a career path failure and still only in my mid-20s. My adult identity had been suddenly disrupted.

I decided to take a stopgap job in the public service while I regrouped and decided what to do with the rest of my life. That stopgap turned into my career - and it was a fascinating, rewarding career. I worked in many interesting areas and met some amazing people, and I loved the concept of serving the public. Even better, for most of my career, my love and knowledge of psychology was a valuable asset. So the failure of my childish career dreams led through a circuitous route to success.

In case I am giving you the impression of that I was a hard working, serious, focussed, academically successful young person, let me correct that misperception. Those sorts of people tend to move calmly into a successful life and career. Let me instead offer through my example hope to the lazy, the disorganised and the easily confused among you.

I was the first in my family to go to university. I had been quite a poor student at school and my parents, who thought tertiary education was

elitist, were shocked when I announced that I was throwing in a safe but incredibly boring job to go and do something as unnecessary as a degree. In my defence, my job for the previous 18 months had been to do nothing but proofread lists of names, addresses and amounts of money. It was life-force-sucking tediously and I was not even good at it. (As an aside, I imagine this job no longer exists given the advent of computers and the internet.)

It was a scary thing for me to go against family expectations. I lacked confidence, was a terrible, terrible procrastinator and I had a huge fear of failure. I struggled mightily at university for the first couple of years. The only thing that kept me going was my fear of failure and the shame of having to admit I had been unable to cope with something my somewhat younger peers seemed to find so easy.

A lesson that has stood me in good stead ever since is to never let fear and uncertainty stop me – they are usually completely unrelated to my chances of success or enjoyment.

Sometimes, failure is the only way to make progress. Ask Elon Musk, he wants to help humans move out into space but his Space X company has had some catastrophic failures along the way. The important thing is that he hasn't let that stop him - and in his case it is literally rocket science. If he succeeds, he will be remembered for his role in turning us into an intergalactic species, not for the number of rockets that crashed and burned in his trial and error days.

Interestingly, one of the best predictors of success is determination, or grit as it has been recently popularised - and the ability to come back from failure is an essential element of determination. In a seminal study of creative geniuses who included Einstein, Picasso, Ghandi and Freud, one of the common factors was their ability to learn from failure. If it works for them, then it will definitely work for the rest of us. All we need to do is to choose to rise above and move on from the failures that beset us all.

Death

Professor Linda Botterill once said to me by way of explaining her frenetic, over achieving life "Well we only get one life so I am determined

to squeeze every minute out of every day". Of course she isn't quite right but as she is a political scientist I think we can forgive that.

Leaving aside any beliefs about an afterlife, it appears that we are either living inside a simulation and/or this is merely one of an infinite number of parallel universes. However, while I take comfort in knowing that in another universe I have superpowers and quite possibly wings, the only life we can perceive is this one so we should indeed make the most of it.

I think of life as like a river that moves through a changing landscape and where you never know what is coming around the next bend.

Sometimes my river flows gently and smoothly and at other times I swirl through rapids and over rocks and towards scary waterfalls of unknown height. But I find that remembering that at the end, my river runs into the sea and disappears reminds me to be grateful for the good times and that the inevitable bad times are transient - that they too shall pass.

While it is good to plan your life and career out, the future isn't always predictable and opportunities can come out of nowhere. Let me give you two small but enjoyable examples of how I once, through sheer chance

because of my job, got to stand on the sidelines of two great political events.

Just after I left school with no clue as to what to do with myself I managed to snag a job almost accidentally as a waitress at Parliament House. My job was to serve the senior members of the newly dismissed Gough Whitlam government. This constitutional crisis (as it was dubbed) was a time of shock and high passions and people marching in the streets across the country. For someone who was not yet 18, standing there listening to the conversations of the recently dismissed ministers gave me a fascinating glimpse into politics, politicians, human nature – and a lot of juicy gossip.

Towards the other end of my career, I was the head of the Australian delegation to an international group which just happened to be meeting in Washington the week that saw Barak Obama elected as the first African American president. The atmosphere was electric and full of hope and ambition for a better world. It was an exciting place to be and I felt very lucky that my job gave me such unexpected opportunities.

So my message here is, take advantage of what each new day brings because you won't be coming back this way again – at least not in this universe.

Gold

This leads me to my final and most important theme – my exhortation to you to focus on moving ever upwards to try to get to the gold.

I'm talking about moving up Maslow's hierarchy. In the 1940s Abraham Maslow conceived of a hierarchy of needs to explain human drives and motivations. He envisioned a pyramid shaped hierarchy with physiological needs such as the need for air, water and food at the bottom, on top of which sit needs relating to safety and security, above which love and belonging, followed by esteem then self-actualisation and at the very top, he later added self-transcendence.

I think of self transcendence as striving to live by the golden rule – to treat others as we would like to be treated. To me this means trying to be my best self and trying through my behaviour and actions to add happiness and kindness to the world – and to avoid adding meanness or

anger of which there is quite the surfeit already. I do of course sometimes let myself down but I try to keep my sights aimed always at the gold.

Since I left the public service I have had time to do volunteer work with disadvantaged children to try to help them build the resilience they need to overcome their unlucky start in life. This was something I decided to do nearly 25 years ago when I saw first-hand the raw deal these children get through no fault of their own and how they slip very early through the cracks and often go on to become the next generation of the 'left behind'. I love this work and the resilience literature tells me that I may well be helping to improve the lives of the children I work with.

So I think we should all try to become our best selves and think about what we can do to help make the world a better place. As the Dali Lama said

'Our prime purpose in this life is to help others.'

Although, he did add *'And if you can't help them at least don't hurt them.'*, which is a pretty good fallback position.

I will finish with a quote from one of my favourite historical figures, the remarkable Hypatia of Alexandria who was a writer, astronomer, mathematician, philosopher and gifted teacher before her murder in the early 4th century. As she put it:

'Life is an unfoldment, and the further we travel the more truth we can comprehend.'

So go forth you happy graduates, I congratulate you and wish you well and I hope you enjoy your unfolding lives.

Melanie Fisher