

Occasional Address – Graduation Ceremony, UC – September 26, 2018

Good morning.

Congratulations to all today's graduates! And congratulations, too, to the people behind you during your work to get to this point – it may be your partner, husband, wife, mother, father, or your friends.

Today I'd like to have a philosophical review of education from my own educational experience. The three issues I'd like to briefly discuss are about readiness to learn, pastoral care in teaching and life-long learning. These issues may reverberate with you in some ways now that you have had many years of immersion in 'education'.

I did not enjoy my schooling, particularly high schooling, because of a number of factors. On reflection, the main reason was my immaturity.

Secondly there was an irrelevant curriculum (for me). I kept wondering, for example, why I had to learn things like simultaneous or quadratic equations, or much of what was taught in chemistry, or a multitude of concepts across most of the subjects I studied. The practical applications of many concepts were not explained to us, other than 'this is sure to be in the test so you'd better know it'.

The great philosopher Bertrand Russell said, *"People are born ignorant, not stupid. They are made stupid by education."*

I certainly felt stupid in many of my classes at high school. As with many people, I recall only one teacher in high school who really motivated and inspired me. She was unusual because she had a sense of humour in an era when teaching was deadly serious. She gave us confidence and she was patient. I couldn't wait to get to her class and I tried very hard to do the best work I could for her. She was also a beginning teacher. In other classes I would never have dared even to put up my hand for help. In fact, several of my teachers used humiliation as a means of control. In some ways they taught me much about teaching and how students can be made to feel if they make a mistake.

Thankfully, we now educate children differently and by 'we' I'm hoping this includes parents, a child's first and foremost teachers. Of course teachers need to put their hearts and souls into teaching literacy and numeracy skills. Nonetheless, there are other important skills for a teacher to develop in children for a modern world. A few weeks ago I was in a primary classroom watching the children working in groups where they had to research, discuss and work together to problem-solve. The task before them was to place twelve or fifteen pictures ranging from, amongst other things, a stone tablet with etched hieroglyphics, an ancient Greek Trireme, a steam engine and a modern computer in historical timeline order from oldest to newest. These children were only eight or nine years old and I couldn't see one disengaged child. Thank goodness teaching can now be

seen as much more of a partnership with the children and not a didactic presence out the front of the room. This is more akin to Margaret Mead's belief that "*children must be taught how to think, not what to think*" a sentiment echoed by eminent education commentators and theorists such as Peters and Einstein, to name a few.

Nonetheless, how best to educate children undoubtedly will be a source of argument in perpetuity. It was in Plato's time and it certainly is now. Many opinions abound concerning the direction education should take for the benefit of the students of today and tomorrow. I imagine that you've heard these platitudes. For example, one is that the students of today will probably move through at least five different careers in their working life and will, therefore, need to retrain many times. We'll see – for some this may be true. Another is that, as educators, we need to prepare students for a future where many jobs have yet to be invented for technologies that have not yet been invented and to solve problems that have not yet been anticipated.

Many educational thinkers believe that it is important we instil in students the will to be 'life-long learners' as an enhancement to their lives. As a digression, and talking about life-long learning, long before your parents were born there was in the 1970s a popular risqué television show called 'No. 96'. I was intrigued and delighted to read a few years ago that one of its stars, Elisabeth Kirkby, completed her Ph.D. from the University of Sydney at age 93. Her thesis was entitled: '*Will We Ever Learn from History? The Impact of Economic Orthodoxy on Unemployment During the Great Depression in Australia*'.

I mentioned the importance of the partnership between the teacher and the child in the teaching and learning process. Essential to this partnership is, of course, the relationship the child has with his or her teacher as well as pastoral care, especially the teacher's showing an interest in the child's learning. When I went to school I don't recall any teacher talking to me about my learning and how I was going. It was sink or swim and cryptic feedback came via the half-yearly reports. Even in my fairly recent past career, and to my unpleasant amazement, when I have expressed an expectation about the pastoral care of senior secondary students of 17 and 18 years of age, I have had teachers say to me, "but Bill, these students are post-compulsory school-age students", meaning they were on their own.

Good teachers, whether they are in pre-schools or universities, would never see the outcome of their teaching as 'sink or swim' and 'they're on their own'. Good teachers instead constantly think of and worry about ways to best support and reach all their students. Good teachers really do want to make a difference for their students.

As you know, we're all different. Yet as a society we still expect students of 18 to be equipped to make profound decisions about their future, such as knowing what their career will be or what courses they should study at CIT or university. Again, as a senior secondary college principal, I saw many students who were just like I had been – not having a clue as to

what they were going to do when they left college and not ready to make such decisions, despite the best efforts of the college's career advisors. Some of these students visited me later to tell me about their new passions since they left the college and the jobs or courses they had tried until eventually discovering what it was they really wanted to do.

What, then, can be done to address these varying stages of student readiness and maturity? I don't have the answer but I suspect greater attention to the pastoral care of senior secondary students may have a role to play in helping many of them at this critical transition time in their lives.

Many of us have experienced a person saying something along the way that has motivated or guided with our learning. I'll never forget an older lecturer at my teachers' college (she must have been in her forties, the poor thing) saying to us that, above all, success with tertiary studies was all about 'stick-at-ability'. It's true. The evidence is in front of me right now. Everyone graduating here today has reached this point through sheer perseverance.

I hope that, when the dust has settled, many of you will contemplate undertaking further study and/or research in your chosen field.

I say this because I know it will open doors for you, as it has for me. I firmly believe further study also helps makes you more marketable and competitive. An added benefit for me was making connections that have resulted in life-long friends. I could never have imagined when I was a teenager that I would enjoy and find great satisfaction from many years of academic work. Even though it is very hard work, post-graduate study is enjoyable and most satisfying. I'm sure the Masters and Ph.D. graduates here will wholeheartedly agree with me.

The great education theorist, John Dewey, said *"Education is not a preparation for life – education is life itself."*

I know that undoubtedly there have been hard times for you to have reached this point today. Sometimes when we're struggling to get an assignment or research chapter in on time we don't appreciate Dewey's comment, *"...education is life itself"*. Now that you have realised your achievement, I hope that you too will appreciate that education is life itself and that you will continue with it in some form. Keep learning! As Confucius said, *"it does not matter how slowly you go as long as you do not stop."*

I wish you all well in your future pursuits. It has been a wonderful honour to have been asked to be with you today.

Thank you.

Bill Maiden