

Katharine Murphy, Graduation Address UC, 10 October 2019

Thank you to the University of Canberra for the great privilege of speaking to you today. I want to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, and pay my respect to elders, past, present and emerging.

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Well guys, you've made it.

You are graduating from the University of Canberra, some of you with your first degree, others with advanced degrees, and the first thing to be said today is congratulations.

Congratulations for persisting, when it has been hard.

Congratulations for pursuing knowledge. Congratulations for valuing knowledge and higher learning.

Congratulations for reading and delving and researching and innovating and pondering and arguing in tutorials when it might have felt easier just to watch Netflix or go to the pub ... although I imagine there's been a bit of that along the way. Perhaps more than there should have been.

I also want to say congratulations and thank you to the loved ones supporting you all here at graduation today.

Getting through higher education is a team effort. It was for me, when I was a student in the late 1980's and early 1990's. Fun fact: We were the first HECs generation, and I sold garden gnomes in the uni holidays to help my mother fund my life on campus.

It's certainly a team effort in my family. My daughter is about to finish film school in Sydney, and I could not be more proud of her resilience and persistence, and we've backed her endeavours every step of the way.

So, I see you, and I thank you – all the mums and dads, and step mums and step dads, husbands, wives, partners, carers and work colleagues, mentors and grandparents, and mates who have helped all of our graduates today fulfil their ambitions. I want to give a particular shout out to the parents of overseas students, who sent their precious cargo to Australia. Thank you for trusting us. The diversity of this student population is, truly, magnificent.

The support crew is part of this story, part of this success, and I feel certain the graduating class is grateful.

This is a short graduation address today and I have two main thoughts I want to share with you.

My first idea is a simple one, and you might scoff at it, but I promise you this really is my best advice.

The advice is: Don't worry.

We live in very challenging times both domestically and internationally.

As well as the all wildness in the world, we worry about whether we can get a job, and keep a job; whether our wages will remain stagnant, whether we can afford to buy a house.

This is an anxious generation, and that's entirely rational, because we have given you so many reasons for anxiety.

We haven't solved all the pressing problems of the world, and in the eco-system I work in, in politics, too much time is spent squabbling over two fifths of bugger all.

I remember when I completed university and sat through my own graduation ceremony, I wondered what the future held.

I was already employed, which was lucky. I graduated during the last really serious recession Australia had, and our main focus was on getting a job. Getting the dream job seemed a very distant prospect.

I landed a job, in Canberra, with the public service. I was grateful, because not all of us fell on our feet.

But I knew the public service was going to be a transitional place for me. I wondered where life would take me; whether I would find my vocation and get an opportunity to make a difference.

So I understand what it is like to be standing at those points in life where one thing is ending and another beginning ...

... and you aren't quite sure how you are going to get from point A to point B.

I don't want to get all Athena Star Woman, or Mystic Medusa on you – but what I'm here to tell you is the universe finds you, if you are open to it.

I'm fully aware this sounds like the self-satisfied mysticism of a self-indulgent Boomer with everything – except I'm not a Boomer, I'm GenX – and I assure you I don't have everything.

I genuinely believe this to be true, not as an aspiration I read on a desk calendar once, but this is the sum of what life has taught me.

It will be ok if you keep shuffling forward, and don't retreat.

The universe only requires one thing from you: that you work hard, and you never waste an opportunity.

It doesn't require you to have the perfect plan or the perfect network, or to be the perfect, most talented and inspired person, or to know right down to the footnotes who you are and where you want to go.

It just requires you to be brave, and to seek truth in the world; to keep moving forward, to look for opportunity and not squander it when it appears before you.

It requires you to be wise enough to know that opportunity doesn't present in a perfect package or a single transaction, it just unfurls before you in a series of steps.

It also requires you to be resilient if opportunity seems a long time coming.

While many of you sitting here today will go on to have great personal accomplishments, and individual achievements – sitting in the audience could be a future prime minister, or a brilliant entrepreneur – what life has taught me, specifically what more than twenty years in newsrooms has taught me, is success isn't an individual sport.

It's a collective action.

Success is people taking the time to nurture and develop your talents and helping you build the confidence to sustain yourself in highly competitive and sometimes combative environments.

Success is collaboration with peers.

Success is two or three heads are always better than one.

If you look for support, more often than not, you will find it, and all life requires of you is that you look for opportunities to pay it forward as you advance along your life plan.

I've told you not to worry, because, honestly, I've spent too much of my life worrying at the transition points like the one we are sharing today. That's my most important message to this graduating class.

But I said a minute ago I had two thoughts to share, so here's the second.

Apart from faith, and forbearance, there's another thing the universe requires of you, because we live in serious times.

It requires you to make a contribution.

You are graduates of this fine institution. The people who have taught you here and nurtured your research and worked with you to improve the way you process information and share it with the world have given you a great gift.

They have equipped you with knowledge, and the facility to find facts and evidence, in an era when some in public life don't care about the truth.

As well as you gaining a professional qualification, your teachers here have given you fluency, and acuity, and the tools to see through disinformation, fake news, propaganda and spin.

They have encouraged you to express points of view that are buttressed by evidence, rather than just indulging flights of fancy.

This is so important.

I can't begin to tell you how important this is, in a culture addicted to shouting and over-sharing ...

... it is vital to understand the difference between what can be known as a fact and a body of evidence and what gets asserted on a whim.

What your teachers have given you, through the great privilege of education, is the foundations of civilisation.

Please understand that, and understand that serious times require us all to defend the values you have been exposed to here.

I said a bit earlier that success is a collective action. You've already experienced that, here, in this institution.

I'd encourage you to draw on this part of your life to sustain you in the life still to come.

Value your education, by all means use it to advance your own economic security and the security of your family, but also use it to make the lives of others better.

Value the relationships you have formed here – some of them could be the most important relationships of your life.

Some of your coming achievements will play out in the public sphere, some of them will be noticed by others, but some of the most important things you do in life, the most meaningful and impactful, are not public acts.

Making a contribution comes in many forms, some observed, some entirely unobserved – but these contributions are the sum of human progress.

We live in challenging times, but I believe in the ingenuity of people to overcome great obstacles, through knowledge and through empathy.

Congratulations on your graduation from the University of Canberra, and look forward with confidence.

