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Thursday 31 July 2008, 11.00am

Graduates from: Griffith Business School | Griffith Health

Saving the Future

Chancellor, the Honorable the Chief Justice, Deputy-Chancellor, members of the University, distinguished guests, graduates, ladies and gentlemen.

As much as he is an inspiration to me, I do not stand here today to do a poor Al Gore impersonation.

When asked what audio visuals I required for this address, I suggested just one slide – a photograph of the Earth taken from Apollo 8 in December 1968.

It is an image of our world taken from another which provides for me a compelling, humbling, and inspiring perspective of our home - and one I will share with you today. All the possibilities and pathways to the future are to be found there.

As your guest speaker, I am honored to be part of such an important milestone in so many lives.

There is in this place a sense of pride and joy, and for many I am sure there will be also a sense of relief, culmination and completion.

Doctorates, Postgraduates and Graduates... those of us here on this stage today are privileged to be with your families and you celebrating your achievement:

That is, your excellence, your hard work, your commitment, and your realization of an important life goal.

And we are all the better as a community for your advancement in what is really more of a beginning than an end.

Highly educated, informed and well skilled peoples are the keystones of an open, tolerant, capable and adaptive society.

Between you, we have people who will serve the global community creating jobs and starting and running small enterprises, building and managing corporations and economies.

We have many here, too, who will care for and administer to the health and well being of people, who will strive for and deliver health care, innovation in medicine, and a better quality of life for the ill and infirm.

You, every one of you, are needed and able to make a difference for the better and you will be surprised in 20 years time just where life has taken you.

When I graduated in 1978 with an honours degree in history I had no idea then where life would lead, and I find it quite amazing to be standing here, an Executive Director of the Environmental Protection Agency, Queensland's environmental watchdog, with a Ph D in history speaking to members of the Griffith University's health and business schools.

It's a far cry from where I thought I would be, teaching population history in an American or English university.

Over the past quarter century, paradoxically, my education as an historian have been used more to make sense of the future than of the past.

Working with engineers, scientists, business innovators, and government, I have advocated for and assisted emerging industries, and advised in fields as diverse as technology commercialization and community development.

For the past decade, I have served in government leading change and promoting innovation and understanding of new technologies, approaches to economics, markets, education and social well being.

I have done all of this with one overriding goal in mind – to do what I can to help sustain the living systems of the planet, so that my children and their children will have at least the same opportunities and quality of life enjoyed by my generation. It is what we call sustainable development.

It is what motivates me and, with that, I would add also my passionate belief in the future and belief in the capacity of people - once they understand the challenge - to rise to the occasion and get the job done.

My presence here today says much about how the world is changing.

It indicates something, too, of the type of skills we will need to manage tomorrow's organisations and build the world of the future – skills that are, necessarily, generalist – drawn of the humanities and the sciences, integrating different disciplines, emphasizing a holistic rather than reductionist approach to problem solving.

My presence here today also says something about the state of the physical world and the changing context and role of our core institutions whether they be businesses, companies, or for that matter governments, hospitals and professions.

In your business studies I hope you will have encountered and considered emerging concepts like the triple bottom line, corporate social responsibility, sustainable development, and corporate sustainability. There cannot be sustainable development without business that is good for people and the planet as well as for profits.

I hope that our health graduates today understand just how important the natural environment is in framing the lives of people.

You will bring your skills to bear in a world where upwards of 40% of all disease is caused by or is reflective of the poor environmental and social conditions in which people find themselves – things as diverse as cholera and typhoid from the appalling sanitary conditions in which a third of the world lives, tropical diseases that are creeping with climate change, HIV that is as endemic as the socio-cultural dysfunction that spawns it in the third world, and respiratory illnesses from pollution in the urban industrial behemoths of Asia.

The planet – the global environment – is, as a renowned economist, Herman Daly, once said the envelope in which society and the economy happen.

Indeed, the biggest question of our time and most likely of this century is how do we live sustainably and get humanity back in balance with other part of the living system that is our planet?

Last year marked the twentieth anniversary of a UN report entitled “Our Common Future”. We were back in 1987 when many of you just born that if yours and future generations were going to have at least the same opportunities and quality of life my generation has enjoyed, there would have to be changes on a global scale in the way we conducted our economies.

Since then progress has not been very encouraging.

We have consumed more energy than was used in the previous 200 years and in the next 20 years we humans propose to put more greenhouse gas emissions into earth's atmosphere than has been emitted since 1750.

Rapid population growth beyond the six billion mark, a massive expansion in our technological capacity to exploit commodities, and the affluent consumption of the industrialized world are combining to strip the earth of its natural resources faster than they can be replaced.

And while we in the first world are beginning to rethink the way we do things, the fast emerging economies of China, India and South America want their share of the economic bounty, causing further impacts almost beyond imagination. Jungles are being devastated, fisheries exhausted, waterways poisoned, and farmlands degraded.

Humanity is drawing down on the natural capital of the earth at such a rate as to threaten the quality of life of its children and all future generations.

In the process, we are polluting our air with carbon emissions that are warming the planet at a rate faster than most species will be able to adapt – and extinction is already between 1,000 and 10,000 times greater than what we might expect without the human impacts of the past century.

The scientists are telling us that if we do not do something very serious about greenhouse gas emissions very soon, it may get to a point later in the century where it will cost a whole lot more to fix what many including Al Gore call a “climate crisis”.

Indeed, we could get to a point where beyond 5 degrees increase in average global temperature, we are not able to do anything.

This is all rather confronting, isn't it, but we do nothing to shape the future by putting our head in the sand. “Nothing is inevitable so long as we are willing to contemplate what is happening”, the great Canadian teacher of English and culture, Marshall McLuhan said.

Ladies and gentlemen, let us create the future rather than get run over by it.

As we go from this graduation ceremony our challenge is to contemplate what is actually happening in our world, acknowledge the personal responsibility we each share for doing something about it, and then each play a small part in fixing it – at work and at home.

An English business leader and writer who I have great respect for, Charles Handy, author of *The Empty Raincoat* and *The Hungry Spirit*, said that learning after university was a process of re-qualification.

For Handy, life itself is the great learning experience. And he is right.

To my way of thinking, there are two very important journeys of discovery we make in life.

One is the journey we make getting to know ourselves – call it growing up – and it comes replete with dreams, aspirations, trials and triumphs, pitfalls and redemptions;

The other is the journey we make getting to know the world around us - our place, other people, family, friends, communities, cultures – the planet itself and who knows in the future, the world beyond our planet.

Handy also observed that the great issues of our time would not be resolved so long as we failed to look beyond the materialist world to that which also encompassed essential values and other considerations such as the human spirit, the value of nature and so forth.

He suggests we take a closer look at ourselves and our world.

Abraham Lincoln said the same thing when at the time of the war to preserve the Union and abolish slavery, he told Americans to “disenthrall” themselves of all the ordinary distractions of life and focus on what really mattered – the enduring principles upon which their country had been founded – notions like democracy, equality and liberty.

For us that means giving up on trash TV and selfish individualism and reclaiming concepts like community and citizenship.

You might think this is all a bit far removed for a business and health graduation but I doubt that we in this room have given up our membership of the human race or our roles as mums and dads, sons and daughters – just because we work in business or want to work as health professionals.

Can I ask you today, as you embark upon the next phase of your learning to make time to better know and understand the connection between you and your planet?

I ask that in your workplace or business, you start thinking about how it would look and be, if it were sustainable in the true sense of the word.

I love American history, as you can probably tell. Thomas Jefferson, one of the founders of the American Republic wrote back in 1813 that each generation had a moral duty to pass on the world “free and unencumbered, and so on, successively, from one generation to another forever”. That is a duty we as a global community are falling well short of right now.

So I ask you to imagine what it would be like to create value without damaging the earth or stealing your children's right to a world at least as good as ours.

Encouragingly, you will not be the first to do so.

Global corporations, the mainstays of the international economy are taking greenhouse gas emissions, climate change, and corporate social responsibility very seriously. So are the major institutional investors and insurance companies that determine the cost of their capital.

Besides millions being spent on being more efficient and consequently saving millions more – using less energy, water and materials, these companies are also taking far greater account of environmental risks that previously were discounted or externalized.

Today we are seeing just the beginning of a new international economy that will reward environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

Whether it be tradable credits for carbon emissions, transferable development rights, biodiversity stewardship payments or a host of other market instruments that are just beginning to be brought to bear – the fact is business is already showing that it will be the fastest moving sector in addressing the great challenges of sustainability.

They are proving, too, the business bottom-line benefits of corporate sustainability – higher efficiency and productivity, attraction and retention of talented highly motivated people, better risk management and reputation.

To the health professionals among us today I remind you to challenge your profession to consider and work not just to extend the duration of human life on earth through the marvels of science, but to consider also its quality and work to extend our understanding of what sustains life on earth in all its dimensions.

Chancellor, Ladies and gentlemen,

Our common obligation whether we are in government, business or in universities is to bring the community with us through education, engagement and empowerment.

Yes we face an array of challenges, but with understanding, dedication and innovation the future can be assured.

Yes we have to face up to climate change, sustainable living and all the other challenges of our inheritance.

But my father's generation who grew up in economic depression, fought and prevailed over fascism, fostered a global economy, and put a man on the moon and safely returned him to Earth.

They did those things unflinchingly and with simple self belief; they met the stretch targets and they did not always have the tools at hand when the challenge arose.

Yes, the fact is we humans have it within our capacity to see sustainable development in our life time.

By the middle of the century we can bring greenhouse gas emissions within an acceptable range; we can replete the earth and ensure the place is in good enough condition to well sustain the people not yet born.

These are neither aspirations nor tasks we can leave to others; these are things we must do ourselves.

Your education is a grounding; already you have shown the great promise of your lives. Please leave here believing in your capacity to matter and make a difference and the world will be a better place.

Thank you for the honour of addressing you today.