

**Southern Cross University**  
**OCCASIONAL SPEAKER ADDRESS**  
***Benedict Coyne***  
**29 November 2014**

**School of Environment, Science and Engineering**  
**School of Health and Human Sciences**  
**School of Law and Justice**

Thank you. I am honoured today to be addressing you on your graduation from this brilliant and bold University.

Chancellor, Deputy Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Senior Deputy Vice Chancellor, Council and staff, distinguished guests and most importantly of all, graduates – CONGRATULATIONS! I would like to warmly welcome you to your respective professions, the end of your tertiary education and the beginning of your professional lives. I hope you take the time to bask in the sunlight of your achievements unshackled from the slam of exam cram and enjoy the realisation of what has been a significant investment of time, dedication and resources over the last few years.

I would like to acknowledge the Wadjal People of the Bundjalung Nation, Traditional Custodians of the land on which this event is taking place, and pay our collective respects to their elders past and present.

I would also ask you to acknowledge our future generations, one, two or even 10 generations hence. Your children, your grandchildren's children...and imagine what kind of world they are going to habit. What will life, technology and geopolitics look like in 20 years time – in 200years time? And think about: "what contribution will you make to well-being of that future society?"

I think that question is a useful barometer for measuring existential fulfillment. It is of course trite and clichéd to say that ultimately money doesn't matter! However, it is not un-true and in our current global climate it is wisdom worth repeating! As American financier and philanthropist David Rubenstein (founder and CEO of the Carlyle Group) said:

*What do most people say on their deathbed? They don't say, 'I wish I'd made more money.' What they say is, 'I wish I'd spent more time with my family and done more for society or my community.'*

I would add that many people including us will probably wish we had had more courage to live our own dreams and ambitions rather than worrying about what other people think we should do.

For me coming to Southern Cross University was a very positive and important milestone in realising my own long held ambitions.

After a conservative Catholic upbringing in Melbourne and Perth and a difficult family life during my teens I spent quite a few years enjoying my freedom and avoiding a career path. Rather than roll straight into Uni I enrolled in the University of the world. As soon as school finished I was off to Europe for a year as a fresh-faced naïve 17 year old on a quest for independence and adventure. I received that in droves in terms of the many and varied jobs I worked and the adventures I had hitchhiking around Europe and living on a steady diet of baked beans, baguettes and bananas to make my travel budget last. It was freedom but it was not all glory and comprised a steep and formative learning curve in my life. I returned with dreadlocks and piercings and while my Dad was none too impressed mum was pretty excited about it all!

I spent the next few years working, travelling and being involved in various audacious social justice projects, from working in an orphanage in Kathmandu; to blockading old growth forest destruction and changing the government in Western Australia. I also rode a bicycle across Australia to raise awareness about environmental issues; toured Australia with an anti-nuclear street theatre comedy; protested the cruel and absurdly expensive mandatory detention of refugees in the middle of the Australian desert; blockaded a huge woodchip on surfboards and intercepted French nuclear submarines on a little dinghy, and much much more.

While I didn't start my law degree until I was 27, I always loved learning and during those travelling years I studied mostly via correspondence through UWA and Murdoch University all the wonderful wholesome subjects of the arts, (philosophy, political science, history, environmental ethics) that I had sidelined at school because other people said I should study maths and science.

I loved the adventure, freedom and excitement of the University of Life but in my advocacy work I was constantly questioning how I could be more effective in impacting greater positive social change. Since my mother introduced me to writing letters for Amnesty International at about age 14 (and watching Rumpole of the Bailey) there has been a glorified vision in my mind of becoming a "human rights lawyer" (accompanied of course by a chorus of angels and also a broken record monologue narrating ad nauseum in the background: "Hey, why don't you study law" "You should study law" "Go on!! Ey?" ... (Except I'm not sure he sounded quite like Mick Dundee).

Perhaps I am stubborn and I was definitely rebellious so I held out as long as I could against my better intuition until the obnoxious inner-voice became too much and I capitulated. My strategic compromise with my most annoying inner self was: "Okay I'll study law but if I hate it that's it and I can get on with the rest of my life!". There is definitely a motto in life for *"doing the things that terrify and excite you will bring your profound fulfillment"*.

My want to study law was founded on my strong passion for social justice. So, my task was to find a University that would accommodate and nurture those values and encourage them to flourish. I searched Australia far and wide for a university

that offered a progressive and powerful socially conscious legal education with a flexible delivery

And I found fine fruit here at SCU.

I had a great chat with Jennifer Nielsen then the Head of the School of Law and Justice and I was compelled, enthralled, excited and terrified!

However, my powerful procrastinator struck again! I deferred my first year to study a Diploma in Holistic Counselling. My grandparents started a small psychiatric hospital in Perth which my mum ended up running after my parents divorced so I have always held an interest in psychology – but that’s another long-ish story.

I finally completed my first semester of law in 2007, and the rest is history. I absolutely loved it!

SCU provided me a fabulous and fulfilling education replete with focused critical analysis and rigorous academic inquiry. It was the academy *tres* *authentic* which involved asking a lot of “why’s” and challenging rather than sheepishly accepting the status quo.

I had a lot of great opportunities here to experience or taste-test my chosen profession some of which required initiative on my part but which the University was always eager to support. They included:

- Representing SCU and Australia at the international client Counseling Competition in Bangalore, India;
- Volunteering at the local Northern Rivers Community Centre and the Environmental Defenders Office in Brisbane working on high publicity case attempting to protect the endangered lungfish from Peter Garrett’s crazy armed conditions under the EPBC Act.
- Undertaking a 2-month clerkship at a top tier corporate commercial law firm in Brisbane and a 2-month internship in the legal team of the Australian Human Rights Commission through the Aurora Project.

Post-graduation I was lucky to land a position as an Associate on the Federal Court in Melbourne with Justice Mordy Bromberg. It was an intense but thoroughly enjoyable year. One of the many highlights was hearing the racial discrimination class action against Andrew Bolt and the Herald Sun and then spending 6 long months assisting in drafting the very comprehensive judgment on sections 18C & 18D of the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (Cth). Although I did have to perfect my deadpan poker face sitting six feet from Mr Bolt as he was cross-examined before a packed court for nearly 2 days – I cannot say that it was not slightly entertaining!

The judgment was not appealed but a significant amount of hysteria about repealing section 18C ensued. But wasn’t the Abbott government listening to the

multicultural population of Australia and deciding not to repeal the section a great victory for civilization in Australia.

My work with Australian Lawyers for Human Rights in the last 3 years has been especially exciting – drafting numerous submissions to UN and parliamentary bodies; appearing before parliamentary inquiries; engaging the legal profession in educational events and meeting many amazing and inspiring people and mentors.

I have also had the privilege of working at a brilliant national law firm that has maintained a strong social justice focus from its genesis by an altruistic Victorian Member of Parliament in the 1920s, nearly 100 years ago. Maurice Blackburn was an ardent advocate for women's equality and he started the law firm to assist vulnerable people who had suffered injustice. He left a great legacy and in its wake the firm has run and won numerous landmark litigation in Australia including for the 40 hour week, for equal employment conditions for women, for better employment conditions for Aboriginal workers in the NT. There are many other very important cases ongoing.

Through my work with Australian Lawyers for Human Rights (ALHR) I have been able to farm a few cases to the expertise of Maurice Blackburn including the now famous Baby Ferouz case currently before the Full Court of the Federal Court (so I will refrain from commenting on it directly). That case was conspired with a colleague at an ALHR film night at the University of Queensland. At the time seemed like a very audacious prospect challenging an obscure section of the Migration Act. But now it has spawned into two High Court challenges, a Federal Court challenge and a heated public and parliamentary debate regarding the very Orwellian caseload legacy Bill!

My current studies at Oxford have been especially enlightening and exciting in a small group of awe-inspiring heavy hitting human rights professionals from all around the world!

All in all I wouldn't have had the excellent experiences I've had without my education here at SCU.

Eleanor Roosevelt, the chief drafter of the sacrosanct Universal Declaration of Human Rights said that: *"Education is the cornerstone of liberty."* Every day I appreciate increasingly what a powerful privilege a university education and legal education is. It allows us to access and influence sections of society where important decisions are made that affect us all, and most importantly the vulnerable and voiceless.

I believe that supporting those less fortunate is the right thing to do because, as the frontiers of modern science increasingly enlighten us, the fact is we are all intrinsically interconnected and interdependent on this planet. We are all in this together – so when facing increasing international conflict and irreversible catastrophic climate change it makes more than mere moral sense to look after each other. It makes serious social sense and even economic sense to do so.

It makes sense to protect refugees feeling conflict and persecution.

It makes sense to protect vulnerable and marginalised groups.

It makes sense to protect the natural environment from unprecedented destruction by human hands.

The etymology of the word “civilization” is “the opposite of barbarity”. Our sophisticated international system for peace and security was borne from the Holocaustic horrors of World War 2 as established by the 1945 Charter of the UN. Until relatively recently, Australia had been a historic global leader in the international human rights project. However, in its mistreatment of asylum seekers, indigenous people and lack of substantive action on domestic violence (to name a few) the Australian government is leading the world down a very dangerous path away from that dream of peace, stability and civilisation.

Education can (and must) change this.

Education is an infinitely powerful elixir that can cure greed and ignorance and encourage and enlighten empathy, wisdom and compassion.

If academia is the fuel tank of civilisation then you as graduates are its gatekeepers and guardians.

I know that sounds like a pretty dramatic and daunting task (and perhaps you didn't apply for that particular job) but what I mean is that your education holds a currency of power.

If you choose, you will gain the access and influence to change the world for the better and keep the hounds of barbarity and bigotry at bay! I know that each one of you can become great if that is what you choose! The famous spiritual teacher Marianne Williamson said “*Nothing liberates your greatness like the desire to help, the desire to serve.*”

As scientists, engineers, health workers and lawyers there is a great amount of extremely valuable work we can do and will do for the betterment of our local communities, of Australia and of the world. There are groups like Engineers without Borders, Scientists for Peace, Australian Lawyers for Human Rights, a wide array of humanitarian work for all of your professions and of course the newly launched SCU Alumni Mentoring Program. Be adventurous and give back.

Lastly I offer these tips:

(i) INTUITION: Learn to listen to and trust your intuition – if you don't know what that is “Google it”. As Steve Jobs said:

*“Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life...Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most*

*important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary.”*

(ii) OPPORTUNITIES: Take every opportunity you're offered and be proactive in creating opportunities for yourself. Network in your profession and seek mentors to guide you.

(iii) AUDACITY & INNOVATION – Be audacious and innovative. Think outside the square, the circle, the squircle; create different shapes and then think outside of them. We are at a critical and unprecedented juncture in human evolution and history. We need you to take the reins and be the righteous leaders of tomorrow. The human and non-human worlds need you all to come up with creative, audacious solutions to our impending global problems applying the Einstein-ism: *“We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them.”*

I encourage you all to lead a bold, brave and courageous life so that when you are nearing the end of it you can look back and be deservedly proud at the contribution you made to Australia and the world. As Vincent Van Gogh said *“The key to success is for you to make a habit throughout your life of doing the things you fear.”*

This education you have received is also a very important gift. Use it wisely. Use it well. And most of all enjoy it! As Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Albert Schweitzer once said:

*Success is not the key to happiness. Happiness is the key to success. If you love what you are doing, you will be successful.*

Thank you.