

## **Southern Cross University Occasional Address**

**Hon Ben Franklin MLC**

**21 May 2016**

I'd like to begin my address today with two profound apologies.

You see, I know that there are a number of people in this room who read today's programme and saw that Benjamin Franklin was addressing them.

What a treat they would have thought!

One of the founding fathers of America. Inventor of the bifocals and the US Postal system. Flyer of kites and discoverer of electricity.

And then they see this strange little bespectacled man standing before them and not one of the great thinkers of the last half millennium and they died a little inside.

To them I say I'm sorry.

My second apology is to those who actually realised they were going to be addressed by a politician today.

I mean if that wasn't bad enough on the day of your graduation, you don't even get a cool politician or someone who everybody knows – not Malcolm Turnbull or Bill Shorten or even Christopher Pyne – no, you're stuck with some obscure new backbencher from the Upper House of the NSW Parliament.

So I'm sorry for that too.

But it is a genuine privilege to be here today to give the occasional address at such an august regional University.

And I know what's expected of me too..

To keep it short, provide some salient life lessons, keep it short, distil some sensible but inspiring words of advice for the world into which you are about to walk, and ... most importantly ... keep it short.

I hope to tick all of those boxes with you today. And I shall attempt to do by regaling you with my six simple rules for life.

## **Rule 1: Do something. Actually make a difference**

Many of you here today are on the brink of new careers. The world is filled with possibilities. Everything is fresh and shiny and new and it is wonderful.

So make the most of it.

You don't have the time to sit back and go with the flow. You do that and 20 years will pass you by just like that.

The more I see of life the more I believe that our fundamental purpose is to ease the burden for other people.

Whether it be in medical research, or social welfare or teaching or any of the myriad other career possibilities, if you look through the prism of, "Is what I am doing now going to make a genuinely positive difference to someone else's life" you can't go wrong.

Which leads directly on to rule number 2...

## **Rule 2: Always act with integrity**

Nowadays people seem to believe achieving pure integrity is some sort of unattainable ethereal goal – reserved only for those few Nelson Mandelas and Mother Therasas who walk amongst us.

They seem to think that acting with integrity demands enormous noble deeds and staring down great injustices.

And that's part of it I guess.

But I believe that our lives start as a blank canvas and that as the seconds and days and years move on more swathes of paint are added until we have a completed picture at the end of our days.

So if that's the case, every single tiny decision we make every day – and there'd be a thousand of them – is an opportunity to do the right thing. To act honestly, and decently, and with integrity.

### **Rule 3: Try to maintain a positive attitude at all times**

Yeah yeah ... I know ... this is all starting to get a bit soppy.

And I always found, just like you I suspect, that at 8am tutorials, the person who was always bright and chipper and offensively energetic was someone I wanted to be as far away from me as possible thank you very much.

But that was until I met Charlie. And I'd like to tell you about him for a minute.

I met Charlie almost 20 years ago at a homeless shelter I used to volunteer at on Saturday nights.

He was one of those people who made a room come alive. With an incredibly infectious laugh and a deep empathy for others he was clearly idolised by every other man in the shelter.

I first saw him when he was playing the Irish tin whistle and he was joyfully magnificent. Sublime. His talent was literally breathtaking.

I'm a little embarrassed to say it, but I couldn't understand how someone so talented was homeless. So I asked him to tell me his story.

He told me he had been a respected flautist for a major orchestra, that he'd had some mental health issues, that he slipped through the system. He told me he'd been sleeping rough for six months when he was set upon by a group of thugs one of whom smashed his foot down on Charlie's right arm so brutally and so repeatedly and so permanently that his strength was gone and he could never hold a flute again.

He could hold nothing heavier than a tin whistle.

Charlie taught me a great deal. Never to take what I have for granted certainly. But more than that.

His was one of the most tragic and unjust stories I have ever heard. It has stayed with me ever since.

But for him there was no self-pity. He adapted and shared his new gift, his glorious tin whistle, his beaming smile and his talent for bringing warmth and compassion and happiness into any room he entered.

We all have bad days, but stay positive ... and remember Charlie.

#### **Rule 4: Travel. Whenever you can**

Gustave Flaubert said, "Travel makes one modest. You see what a tiny place you occupy in the world."

And he's right. It's so easy to believe that this reality – the here, the now – is the only one available to us.

But it's not of course. We can change our reality whenever we want to. But we don't. We often find ourselves in a rut of doing the same thing in the same places, having the same conversations with the same people day after day after day.

When we travel studies have shown that entirely different parts of our brains light up. In a new country with different languages and colours and smells, we are invigorated and our system is shocked into understanding that there are an infinite number of other possibilities for our lives.

And if you can't travel then read. Read books. Read the books you were always going to but never got around to. Read *Wuthering Heights* and *the Catcher in the Rye* and *Ulysses* and a *Brief History of Time* and *Harry Potter* if you must.

But read. And please please please read these things in books with their cracked spines and their dog-eared pages – not on kindles and ipads and ipods and iphones, because these things are doing none of us any good.

Which brings me on to rule number 5.

## **Rule 5: Stop looking down**

What an extraordinary age we live in. We hold the entire sum of human knowledge – each of us – in our hands. And that is a great thing.

But it is also tearing us apart. Our smart phones are so innately connected to our souls that we get withdrawal symptoms if we are away from their siren's call for too long.

An opinion piece in the New York Times last year noted that some college students referred to a "rule of three". That, if you are in a small conversation of five or six people at dinner, "you have to check that three people are paying attention – heads up – before you give yourself permission to look down at your phone".

Now we've all seen this. We've probably all been part of it. And we all know what the net result is - conversations that are superficial and easy to jump in and out of.

The upside, of course, is that this means you can never be bored. As soon as you sense a conversational lull is coming up you can pirouette straight down to the phone on your lap and receive a whole new burst of stimulus.

But the far more important downside is that a genuine feeling of connection – of connectedness - is diminished or lost altogether.

I have friends who regularly check their Facebook while we are actually in the middle of a conversation. Indeed studies have shown that when two people are talking, the mere presence of a phone on a table between them or in the periphery of their vision changes both what they talk about and the degree of connection they feel. People kept the conversation light and on topics where if they were interrupted it wouldn't matter. Even if the phone stayed silent for the entire time.

I believe this. We don't have to get rid of our phones. We just have to use them more deliberately. To leave them, from time to time, turned off, or in our pockets, or on silent in our bedrooms.

For that is the only way we will reclaim investment in each other and conversation that is deep and meandering and insightful to our lives.

## **Rule 6: Silence is golden**

The flipside to this of course is that with so much information being thrown at us, as a society we now find it very difficult to embrace silence. To sit quietly with our own insecurities and paranoias and to allow the clutter to settle.

We are so used to constant stimulus – I actually think we're addicted to it – that when it is not there we don't know what to do.

Timothy Wilson, a psychologist at the University of Virginia devised a study to test people's capacity to just sit and think.

People were asked to sit in a chair for between 6 and 15 minutes, with no phone or magazine or book, just with their own thoughts. The only rules were that they had to stay seated and not fall asleep.

And the scary thing? People chose to give themselves mild electric shocks rather than sit alone with their thoughts.

But ladies and gentlemen, silence is critical. For reasons both physiological and psychological. It allows us to order our thoughts, and determine our direction not just career around and around like some sort of crazy pinball machine.

Now, because of this constant and unending noise which surrounds us, our essential foundation – what it means to be alive – is being severely corrupted.

But if we reclaim silence, both alone and with others, we reclaim what it is to be human.

As MIT Professor Sherry Turkle said, "If the conversation goes quiet, you have to let it be. For conversation, like life, has silences ... It is often in the moments when we stumble, hesitate and fall silent that we most reveal ourselves to one another."

So reveal yourselves, live your lives with purpose, always act with integrity.

For the future is yours, and the opportunities are golden.

But always remember, the only one who can paint the canvas of your life is you.