

SCU Graduation Occasional Address

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1.00 pm, Friday, 9 December 2016
Whitebrook Theatre, Lismore Campus

I would like to acknowledge the Widjabal People of the Bundjalung Nation, Traditional Custodians of the land on which this event is taking place, and pay tribute to the unique role they play in the life of this region.

And I'd like to thank those who invited me and those of you listening

I want to talk today about connection – not to devices, or social media or broadband...but connections to people and place.....like Southern Cross University ...I want to celebrate the values of this region and celebrate the best of human life and endeavour – at a time when powerful forces are appealing to the worst in us

....and I want to say something very simple in the next 10 minutes to all graduating students.... that the quality of the connections we make outside of the workplace can help make our jobs and careers inside that workplace much richer.....

Short tour through my life

First I want to give a very short tour through my life—just to help you get a sense of who I am...at 10...I was a kid from Brisbane suburbs, living in London not far from Wembley stadium, with my little sister Toni and our parents...listening to Bob Dylan, reading Tolkien and playing soccer

At 20...I was listless university student... playing in a ska band and listening to community radio

At 30....after years volunteering at that community radio I'd joined ABC and was fortunate enough to be working at ABC Four Corners, where I spent 5 years...

By 40...I'd started specialising in reporting on healthcare, wrote my first book – *Too Much Medicine*. ..I'd had a year Harvard as a Harkness Fellow, published my first original study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and was living in Washington DC writing *Selling Sickness: How the drug companies are turning us all into patients*...which became a highly successful and influential book...I was being invited

to speak at conferences all over world---and giving workshops to medical reporters across the United States to try make medical reporting more like journalism and less like promotion....

By 50I'd become so specialised as a journalist I just needed to do a PhD --- completed last year, at Bond University, and I now have a new life as an early career researcher...collaborating with outstanding researches across the country and the planet.....helping build a global alliance within the healthcare establishment—to address the problem of medical excess.... the *British Medical Journal*...has launched a campaign called *Too Much medicine*--- and we are running a series of highly successful international conferences called *Preventing Overdiagnosis*....and most rewardinglywe've been fortunate to win some major 5 year NHMRC grants to study the problem of overdiagnosis and overtreatment in medicine---how to wind back excess.....our work is certainly cut out for us....

Connections

So paradoxically, while I have quite a few grey hairs, I like all of you have just graduated into a new period in my life....full of both excitement and trepidation....and a time when the connections outside of my workplace are vitally important....connections to family, friends, community and environment.....

Family

The first and often deepest connections - for better or worse - are with our families...and they often get lost or overlooked in the noise of our busy lives and careers....

My little sister Toni and I were very close as young kids....but as we became adults and moved into our study and work lives...living in different cities and even different countries.... I felt more and more distant and separate emotionally.....we had holidays together...and saw each other regularly and others would have seen us as close – both we knew we were not as close as could have been....

....but then about 10 years ago our relationship improved dramatically... and paradoxically this was when Toni was diagnosed with an aggressive ovarian cancer...myself and my partner moved from Byron to be near Toni in Melbourne— and we had three of the most intense and extraordinary years of our lives...with the deepest emotional connections imaginable.....ending with Toni's death in December 2009.....I think this is first time I've spoken publicly about my sister's death....I do so, in order to encourage all of us ...as much as possible....not to take our family relationships for granted – particularly those with siblings...not to let the petty worries of the workplace overshadow what can be the most vital connections of our lives...not long before her death Toni recorded a song with a group of women with terminal cancer....called Resilience....the line Toni wrote and sang was "every day is precious"and that includes today.....

Of course for many of us the deepest connections are with our partners- and I want to acknowledge Miranda—whose love is the most amazing support of all... and I want to introduce you to our son Louis(Louis onto my shoulders)....and so you can see him, I'll put him on my shoulders.....and you know... just as the intensity of loss and grief puts things in perspective-- the joy of these relationship also helps put the ups and downs of worklife into perspective.....

Friendship

The next connection I want to pay tribute to is friendship – which for many people can prove more valuable than family....and like family relationships, deep close long-term friendships are not always easy- they can be hard and brittle and sometimes they break.....but some of them survive and I'm lucky enough to have a small group of friendships that have lasting for decades...two weeks ago I sat with my friend Robin in the sunshine in a café in Castlemaine, just north of Melbourne—and the short two hours we spent together were so powerfully energising...so positive—Robin and I met in about 1986...I've become friends with his 3 children...his first grandchild – now 1yr old Leon- and my 2 year old son Louis are now becoming buddies---even across the physical distance.....I think my mother taught me that even when we don't see friends for a long time—knowledge of that friendship somehow wraps around us...like a warm coat in winter...

Community

From friendship – I want to move to connection to community – a value I know this university holds dear –community's such a nebulous term, so overused, yet so vital to a sense of belonging.... the weekly farmers market is not only a place which feeds us, but also an important part of our social calendarcommunity choirs are an amazing way to connect and I think we must have more per head of population in the Northern Rivers than most regions of the world.... the Lismore Lantern Parade not only celebrates community- but helps to make it...the Byron Writers Festival –with its long time support from Southern Cross University...is another great example of community in action----and then there is one of my favourites----at a time when the pressures of the workplace are perhaps at their peak in the lead up to the summer break.... – along comes the Mullumbimby Music Festival.....again, supported by this university....as a manifestation of its connection to community

Environment

And finally there our connection with the environment, the country to which we aspire to belong... looked after so lovingly for thousands and thousands of years...but now so threatened from multiple sources of attack.....lets explicitly celebrate this connection to country as often as we can---in small ways – and in large.... because surely this is one of the firmest values of this region ---

this morning with Louis...we watched the Eastern Rosellas in our garden and the Lewins Honeyeaters at the top of the Tuckeroo tree...we listened to the whip birds and Common Koel....we saw paperbarks flowering and we picked

frangipanis.....appreciating the beauty of the bush is something I inherited from my Mother Jo...and am hoping to pass on

And at a much bigger scale - what could be a better example of connection with country than the highly effective regional campaign to stop coal seam gas mining in the Northern Rivers.....captured so passionately by the documentary *The Bentley Effect*—from locally based film director Brendan Shoebridge.....if you haven't seen it, please do....

Conclusion

In this bright new digital age, the boundaries between work and life are collapsing --- for better or worse....on the up side many of us can work from our homes, with more connection to family....on the downside there is a sense that work is bleeding into every corner of our lives....

I want to close by restating the simple message that we need to celebrate the dignity of our private and social lives...assert our rights to maintain connections outside the workplace with friends and family and community and environment....when I go on a months holiday next week, I will not check any emails until I return...and having that time to renew and revitalise *outside* makes us so much more efficient *inside* the office

Thanks again to *Southern Cross University* for this opportunity, thank you to the graduates for listening.... and I warmly wish you all the best with your endeavours and connections ---in the workplace.... and more importantly, outside it

Thanks