

## SCU Graduation Occasional Address

**Mr Steven Layt**

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11.00 am, Saturday, 12 September 2015

Whitebrook Theatre, Lismore Campus

Deputy Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, distinguished guests and **most** importantly, graduates.

What a rare pleasure it is to be with you on such a special day in your life. It's the end of your studies, "and" it's the beginning of some very bright futures.

Some of you are clear about *where to* next? For some it's straight into a job, for others, it will be straight into a Pub. The Pub was in fact my very first stop after leaving this ceremony nearly 20 years ago now and I still highly recommend it.

But I digress... Yes, it's true that some of you **do** know what's next; many of you certainly do not. It is indeed true that very little in life **is** known with any

“real” certainty.

But let me not speak too philosophically, let me instead speak from the heart today and speak to you about some of my truths, in the hope that they may help "you" in the next part of "your" journey.

I would like to offer up two ideas today for you to consider. The first is the notion of "Authenticity" the act of being one's self, being genuine, being "real".

The other idea I'd like to share is about "Mentorship", both having a mentor and being a mentor. Both can make the difference between being "just good enough" or becoming "as good as it gets" in life- both professionally and personally.

But between Authenticity and Mentorship, one idea definitely trumps the other, and, well, without it, you risk losing everything that ultimately matters. So let's start there, with a personal story about Authenticity.

Put simply, I've spent the vast majority of my professional career "faking it". I was unknowingly faking it until I made it, and, to my great surprise, I made it.

I went from being a KFC cashier at sixteen who never finished high school, to assuming the President's office of the largest casual dining restaurant chain in the world. Not too bad for a working class boy from Grafton.

Now, when I say I was "faking it", that didn't mean I didn't earn it, or work hard. I worked hard, REALLY hard all throughout my career. But, during my rise to the top of business I was indeed faking it, because I had let myself become someone other than "me". I wasn't being real, I wasn't being Authentic. I was simply "fitting in" to the roles expected of me.

Importantly, I wasn't doing that on purpose, it wasn't "conscious". You see the process of losing the connection to who you are in this race in business and life is really insidious, it creeps up on you.

Then, before you realize it you wonder who that fat middle aged guy really is who's looking back at you in the mirror.

So let me tell you why it happens, how you can lose yourself and what you can do to live an authentic life, one that allows that beautiful glow of "you" to show up at your job and in your life every-single-day.

You start losing yourself from the day you're born really. Your wide-eyed innocence is swapped out for "compliance". You're convinced early to follow the mainstream conventions and I believe that's a tragedy.

You see our paths in life are very linear-- You work hard in school, complying with the "rules" because unless you follow the "instructions" you won't be "successful" and you certainly won't get into Uni. So you work hard in school. Then, you work even harder here at Uni because unless you do that - no job, you'll be poor.

But don't worry, I'm sure you'll all get a job, and then (lucky you) you'll spend that time working the hardest you ever have. Why? Because you'll want to "**make it**" then once you've (kinda) made-it you'll work even harder to make

sure you put you kids through the exact same path you've been put through and that's expensive so don't lose that job, or you'll be screwed.. Then you finally get that done, and you can retire at last!

Then, you die... Then, well, you're **really** screwed.

This concludes the motivational part of my talk today.

But wait, there is good news. It doesn't have to be that way. When you are living a life that's true to who you are, it will be anything but linear.

You know you're on the path to authenticity when you can no longer be bought, when you value material things less than your experiences. When you take decisions few people in a similar situation would take. Not because you're more courageous necessarily, but because you're aligning to a bigger truth, being true to "who you are".

Let me give you an example.. I have been married to my beautiful wife for more than 20 years, we've been together since I was 18 years old. Nikki is truly the love of my life and my very best friend.

My career has forced me to pack up and relocate with my beautiful wife and family **23 times** over the last 20 years. Let me repeat, yes, we are still married.

So, when your Board of Directors make the decision to move your company across the country for "financial savings" and "synergy", and expects you to move too – for the **24<sup>th</sup> time**- what do you do?

Well, you say “No thank you”. You see, when you know who you are, when your decisions are more aligned with your values than to what others need from you, when you care more about your legacy as a father, a husband and a leader. Then you reach a point in your life when saying. "No thank you" becomes easy.

So that’s what I did and it was one of the proudest days of my life. It felt way better than the paycheck and it will mark the start to an even brighter future for my family.

Bottom-line graduates; dare to be who you are, dare to **boldly** design a life that brings you real passion versus following those "rules" that are (and will be) imposed upon you. You are already enough, just as you are and once you believe that, "really believe it" then there's nothing to fear.

Doing the right thing becomes easy. So Please - Don't fit in, don't fake it for goodness sake and don't follow the conventions. You will not be counting your money when you’re dead.

I'm a firm believer that few people can really work this thing called "life" out entirely on their own. Few can fully find the path to their authentic self without other people's help.

People you love and who love you, people you trust in your life can be like your personal Hogwarts express, transporting you to a place where your true talents can grow and flourish.

This is where my second idea for the day- “Mentors” comes in, with their magic of keeping you honest to who you are and setting an example through which you can learn more about yourself.

Transformative mentors are rare. In fact, I've had only three key Mentors in my life, each one changed my life's course at pivotal times. Importantly however, it took a combination of the magic of all three of them to really transform.

Only three mentors.

And compared to many of you - I'm an old-fart, so that's really not many. Let me tell you about them.

My first mentor, Bob Wegener who is my father-in-law in fact, effectively retired at forty-eight from a high-stress career that all but broke him. He decided to change his life, decided to really live and take personal control of his future before he died, knowing that death was the one thing no one controlled.

Back then, with kids still in school that decision was high risk; it was unpopular and certainly was not understood. But boy, it was bold, it was brave, and it was courageous...

When I first met Bob he was already living authentically and years after leaving that career he wasn't counting his riches in money but in the richness of his life experiences. Bob made a huge impression on me back then and he set an inspiring example. He still does.

In the formative parts of my early career he and his wife Diane became my trusted advisors and mentors. Each encouraged me to go with my instincts and not the safe path and to not fear failure, instead fear regret. It was a great push-start on my journey and I'm so honored to have them both here today.

The second of my Mentors, was a guy called David Harrison. When I was just twenty one years old, I was the proud GM of my very first KFC restaurant and David managed training for KFC. I remember calling David one afternoon, asking what I'd have to do to keep moving up the corporate ladder.

Now, He could have just said "Work Harder" and hung up, but he didn't, instead he flew me to Sydney and spent the day with me visiting restaurants, asking me loads of questions and really challenging my thinking.

I didn't realize it then, but that day was one of the most important job interviews of my entire life.

The day ended, David sat me down and said. "Let's make a deal. You decide to go back to school, because you'll need a Degree to move ahead with us. If you do that I'll support your education financially as long as you never fail a subject, ever and every assignment you write, is about KFC.

Within 6 months of that conversation, I was starting right here in Lismore as a mature age student.

After graduating and over the next 6 years I rose through every operations management position there was within KFC, which ultimately landed me in America where I continued to travel the world with

KFC's parent company YUM Brands.

What a ride! My seat on my Hogwarts express would not have happened unless David brought me the ticket and I'll be eternally grateful for that.

The trifecta of my "magicians of the soul" came in the form of Mr Lou Kaucic. An accomplished executive in his own right, Lou became my Executive Coach and Mentor some 7 years ago.

Back then, I was a Chief Operating officer overseeing a \$2 Billion dollar business. I was also losing myself and I didn't realize (at all) that I had started to become someone else.

Over those years, to anyone looking in I was "living the dream" but my identity had shifted into that of the text book "Executive". I dressed a certain way to look the part. I behaved in ways that I was thought were appropriate to keep the part. Slowly putting on my corporate drag every day was changing me.

Lou could see what I couldn't, and he became the clearest mirror in my life. A

mirror that reflected truth, rejected fear, Lou helped me repurpose my journey. The work we did together allowed the "real me" to step forward, a better me than the person I was unknowingly "faking".

My heart got opened to a new way to Lead, and in the years that followed I enjoyed more career and personal success that I could ever have imagined. Only last week in fact I reminded Lou again, and it's true. He saved my life.

So, today, I've traded in a day- job for a life where I get to live "my" passions, which oddly enough have nothing at all to do with business. But that's for another speech.

My mentors today are my three beautiful children who I'm just SO proud of and who inspire me daily.

Sixteen year old Emily, who is teaching me that following your dreams, can only have one logical end-game; Just to be happy and that's enough.

Fourteen year old Lachlan, who's teaching me you **can** have the heart of a man, even when the world still thinks you're a boy and nine year old Chelsea who (by her example), reminds every day to be fully present in this very moment, because the magic that resides there and in this room, **right now** does have the power to change the world.

So.

I leave you with this last thought.

Be courageous enough to be yourself, be humble enough to seek out mentors in your life, because they can change it; and be generous enough to be a mentor for someone who needs "you" to help them on their journey.

In doing this, you will save the most important life there is from realizing anything less than its awesome potential.

Your life.

Congratulations graduates and good luck! Thank you.