Melbourne University Graduation Address

3.30pm, Saturday 9 August 2008

Keynote address delivered to graduates predominantly from the Faculty of Arts, the University of Melbourne

Good afternoon, Vice-Chancellor, Provost, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen, parents and friends – and most importantly, our graduating students:

I am not here to talk to you about the obvious – the importance of pedagogy or the great honour of a Melbourne University Arts degree. A degree is a great accomplishment that shows perseverance. But unlike obtaining a professional practicing qualification that you are expected to hang in an office, not many people will see your physical degree beyond this day. You cannot carry around your qualifications with you, they are invisible. So unlike those in the professional medical, legal or engineering spheres, what is your practice?

There is a general cynical view that nothing useful comes out of an arts degree, because there's no guaranteed profession attached to the end of it. I had difficulty finding a job. Everyone has difficulty. You guys aren't so special! So I am not here to commiserate over your futures or make substandard jokes.

Doing an arts degree really is learning to see the world in an entirely different way. That is your daily practice.

I am not exaggerating when I say that going to university changed the entire course of my life: I once looked through some old Farragos, dating from the mid-1970s. They were very similar to the Farragos of today – revolutionary student rags filled with anti-war, explosive feminist and anti-capitalist sentiments. Other students found them run-of-the-mill, but I found them incredible. I spent hours poring over them in the basement of the Ballieu library.

I found them incredible because at the exact same time as they were printed, my father was dragging dead bodies from the killing fields. He had not seen a book in four years. My mother was in Vietnam making money through the cloth-selling trade. She has not read a book in her life. As part of ethnic cleansing in Cambodia, they closed down al the Chinese schools. The Chinese were considered the ultimate capitalists. Khmer Rouge soldiers drove the ethnic Chinese up to the top of a hill dotted with anti-personnel landmines, and left them there to explode and die.

So when my parents came here, in the back of their skulls life was about survival and about security. And the only way they felt I could get that, was through a steady career.

But I had a meltdown at seventeen, in my final year of high school. I didn't even know what tertiary study meant, but back since year ten I was taught Shakespeare, King Lear, Renaissance art history. I would catch a bus from the tree-lined lanes of Essendon, and go back home to our house behind the Invicta carpet factories in Braybrook, where the only literature my mother read at home were the Bilo and Safeway ads in our letterbox. I would look after my younger siblings, while mum worked in the garage.

So I could not see what success meant, I could only see where I would be if I failed. If I failed, I would spend the rest of my life in a Betty Friedan nightmare, vacuuming the house with Gore Vidal's running commentary on Venice pounding through my skull. I had all this knowledge, and it was all useless. I would never go to Italy. Never even get a profession, let alone have time for a gallery. This would torment me for the rest of my life. I could never be content like my friends who worked in factories in Footscray. Knowing stuff was a curse.

So when I got to university, I thought I was so clever. I'd made it into 'Mao Bin U'. Even though our relatives could not read or write, they knew about 'Mao Bin U' – they made the title sound like a university for discarded communists, but they understood the prestige. I name- dropped Kafka and I drank lattes. I learned about globalisation. I learned to debate, and got annoyed and angry at those whose ideas did not accord with mine. I thought I was so right and enlightened. Intellect is a real ego-enhancer.

But this is a terrible thing. I got annoyed when lecturers were dull, or presented badly. One day I fell into slight irritation because everyone was saying how one certain tutor didn't speak English properly, and we were to have him teach us next, after our lecture on South-East Asian politics.

Our lecturer Jackie Siapno then said something which changed our lives. Before she delivered her lecture, she said to us, 'your tutor Fernando De Araujo, is only just beginning to learn English. He's been learning it for eight months because he has just come out of an Indonesian prison where he spent the last seven years of his life."

We entered Fernando's tutorial that day, learning intellectual humility. We felt a deep honour to be taught by this quiet gentle man who at the age of 12, saw all 18 members of his family massacred. Fernando told us that in jail, he was thinking of smashing his head against the wall because he did not want to give information about his friends. Then an Indonesian soldier said to him, 'don't think such crazy thoughts.' He told us it was a miracle that the enemy guessed at what he was thinking, and had the common human kindness to offer hope. He is now the President of the National Parliament of East Timor, and recently, acting president of the country - and it amazes me every time I think that we were once in a small tutorial room, being taught by him.

After that, I saw the world differently. More importantly, I saw my own world differently. I'd always felt guilty and ashamed that my mother couldn't speak English, and sad she could not understand certain concepts I could.

But I realised something about my mum, in the back shed working on her jewellery. Most people don't think about how things are made. We usually don't think about where our clothes, our cars, everything that we own, comes from. We think we're so independent because we earned enough money to buy our first car, without even realising that we are never as independent as we would like to think. After all, it takes about a thousand people to make a car! My mother made chains in the back shed. Do you know how an outworker makes a chain? She stretches a piece of gold wire until it is almost hair thin. Then she cuts it into tiny millimetre lengths with a surgeon's scalpel. You know how during Christmas you make paper chains? Well, my mother linked those tiny, tiny pieces of wire like paper chains. It would take her a day to make a bracelet at first. She would be paid about $20 for the day. That works out to be $2.50 an hour.

She did all that, for seventeen years, so I could end up at university. She emerged out of the shed at forty, arthritic, illiterate, with foggy eyesight, bewildered by the person I had become. I spoke and thought in a different language, I had filled my head with mostly meaningless words and irrelevant ideas.

Through my mother's silence, I learned to listen, not to people's words, but to the actions and stories behind the words. This is perhaps why I write.

George Orwell, the writer, once encountered a young, impoverished volunteer in Barcelona. He suddenly realized with a mixture of sadness and shock that for this kid, all the tired old slogans about liberty and justice were actually *real*. He cursed his own cynicism and disillusionment when he wrote these lines:

For the fly-blown words that make me spew
Still in his ears were holy,
And he was born knowing what I had learned
Out of books and slowly.

People offer me polite charges of bravery for the things I do and for things I write. But let me assure you, books don't change people's lives. People change people's lives. I had no cultural capital – none of the things some people take for granted – money, art, culture, books. If my life had not taken the fortunate, blessed turns it did, I might be contently carrying babies in Phnom Penh. I came to my education as a blank slate. Everything we are is as a result of our teachers, and I hope you will honour them, think of them and thank them today. Do not take any of it for granted.

What you have achieved is a very rare thing. You might not think so, looking around the audience, and seeing two hundred and fifty other graduates with you. But you've already got a leg up from my friends who grew up in Footscray and Braybrook, who work in factories, who don't read newspapers. You're going to be the future policy makers, teachers, politicians, artists, writers, musicians, librarians, holders of cultural capital. Many of you are going to make decisions that affect people who may not have the opportunity or ability to exercise their intellect. We have to realise the opportunity to freely exercise our intellects is a gift, not a given.

But Intellect does not mean a thing unless you know what to do with it. The Nazi doctors idolised the intellect. They thought that the intellect was supreme. But the heart is far, far more important than the intellect. The heart allows you to understand others and to help others, because the heart sees humility.

Albert Einstein said that there are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle. Learning is a miracle. May you always be open to the miracle of learning, and I wish you all the very, very best for your future.