

Graduation speech at Oxford Brooks University Business School, September 7

Governor, Vice Chancellor, family and friends of the graduates and above all,

Dear graduates

I consider it a great honour to be invited to speak to you today. At the same time it is a great responsibility.

Ideally I should tell you something that you will remember for a while – and that you can tell your grandchildren in 30 or 40 years from now. When I talked to my grandchildren recently about my own graduation ceremony I had to confess that I did not remember anything other than the handing over of the document. Not sure if I can avoid this embarrassment to you – it is an uphill battle taking into account the Ebbinghaus forgetting curve: much of what is being heard is forgotten within a day....the odds are against me.

Today marks an important day in your lives – yet, it is a beginning of a journey.

To get to this point was an important achievement in itself to which I commend you. The personal competencies that got you here – passion, commitment, tenacity, open minds to learn – will be important throughout your lives. Nurture them. They will be even more important than what you have learned.

When I graduated from the faculty of law in Vienna just a couple of years ago (rather a couple of decades ago.....) the world was quite different. It looked predictable, stable, a career was pre-ordained, all indicators pointed upwards.

My second employer was IBM and when I joined it was like joining a family for the remainder of ones professional life – and indeed, I stayed for 32 years. You felt the commitment that the company was taking towards you in every step. One was taken care of – from a sports club, to culture, health insurance and pension.

Peter F. Drucker, one of the great thinkers of the 20th century (the Economist stated that he was not only a great management thinker but one of the greatest thinkers of the last century) pointed some 40 years ago to a sea change in the our society – he demonstrated that we are moving from a more protective and cosy employee society towards a more challenging and demanding entrepreneurial society. This does not mean everybody is an entrepreneur, but it means that wherever you stand (even when employed by a company) you have to act in an entrepreneurial spirit. It means that the social compact is changing and that you take responsibility for yourselves.

Should you be worried about this? Should you regret the gradual vanishing of the “golden cages” that corporations and public sector organizations were so great in building?

I frankly don't think so. But you better get ready. Change is upon us and it is accelerating. Drucker was the master in bringing things to the point – “you cannot manage change, you must get ahead of it” – first in your minds and then in your practice and your lives.

Hence my message to you is not a feel-good message but a message of truth and encouragement.

The world you inherit is beset with great challenges. Change is upon us – if we want it or not. Yet – you have the greatest opportunity in generations: to be the architects and builders of a new world. You belong to a small group who have been equipped to take such a daunting a role. You may exercise it wherever you stand – but it goes beyond having a job in a company or any other organization – it means you are engaging in society. You will not just be a cog in a big machine (as many of my generation were) but you will be a node in a vibrant network of engaged individuals.

YOU WILL HAVE PURPOSE like no generation before you. Companies are currently struggling in defining this broader purpose for themselves and their constituents – but they have started to understand that they are not acting in isolation but as part of society.

Yet it all comes at a price – you will have to rigorously apply the thinking and reasoning skills (in particular critical thinking) and your emotional competencies.

You cannot be content to be an expert in a domain; you must constantly work on deciphering what happens in society and what it means. And you must act on it, in concert with others, wherever you stand. Just wanting to do good is not enough – achieving impact is what counts. Many NGOs pride themselves that they have the key to save everybody else – but by drilling deeper you will be able to differentiate those who are selling their single product (in many cases fear) and those who take responsible action in shaping society by providing true value.

In the good old days life was thought as a curve – in some way a Bell curve – with the various stages of education, moving up a career attaining a plateau and then gradually moving downwards.

I would suggest to look you at your lives in a totally different way – living your lives in growing gyres or rings, where you come back to fields where you have been before but you will be different and hopefully you will have grown during the years while you completed a ring.

There is a wonderful poem from Rainer Maria von Rilke: I live my life in growing gyres or rings.cybernetics would call it circularity as opposed to linearity. It is a fundamentally different world view and it conveys a different meaning to what you do at a given moment.

There is a final point I would like to make though – to live fulfilling lives in this new emerging world and to become an architect of the future, you need to know yourselves. And you need to be ready to reinvent yourself throughout your lives – as Harvard psychologist and philosopher William James at the beginning of the 20th century distinguished those who are “once born” – who do not stray from the straight and narrow and those who are twice born – who embrace fundamental change. One thing I want you to take away from my short speech: read the article “Managing Oneself”, a HBR Classic – again from my hero Peter Drucker. It reminds you that change starts with yourself. This article was for sure life changing for me – I am standing here in front of you because I read it some 20 years ago and changed my own life planning.

I wish you the best for your lives – embrace the challenges and get ahead of the change. Find your purpose and take your share in shaping the new world. The new world does not appear by any natural law but it is created but by connected thoughts and actions of myriads of individuals who are beset by the passion of making the world a better place for all.

Become creators of the future.

You can do it and my best wishes are with you.

