



RHODES UNIVERSITY
Where leaders learn

RHODES UNIVERSITY 2012

VICE-CHANCELLOR'S GRADUATION CEREMONIES ADDRESS

FACULTY OF HUMANITIES

14.30: 13 April 2012

OFFICE OF THE VICE-CHANCELLOR

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Introduction

In his absence, due to illness, the Chancellor, Prof. Jakes Gerwel
Judge Jones and other members of the Rhodes University Council
The Chair of Convocation, Reverend Simon Gqubule
Our honorary graduate, Ms Epainette Mbeki
New graduates, and families and guardians of graduates
The Public Orator, Prof. Paul Maylam
Deputy Vice-Chancellors, Deans, Registrars, Heads of Departments and
academic and administrative colleagues
Members of the Students Representative Council
Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Molweni, dumelang, good afternoon, jambo, goeie dag

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to this graduation ceremony, at which we acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of the new graduates of Rhodes University.

Recognition

First and foremost, I wish to congratulate you, our new graduates, on your tremendous achievement.

To be awarded a degree, diploma or certificate from Rhodes University entails dedicated endeavour.

When you joined us you were told that at Rhodes learning and education is a partnership of mutual commitment to the pursuit of knowledge and understanding, to the development of expertise and skills, and to the embrace of appropriate values and attitudes.

Your graduation this evening is testimony that you have fulfilled your side of the partnership. You have displayed the necessary commitment to learn, to acquire knowledge and to develop expertise.

You will, I trust, acknowledge the contributions of your lecturers and tutors, of laboratory and computer technicians, of administrators and wardens, and of cooks, cleaners and gardeners. All of these people have laboured to create a special intellectual, social and physical environment at Rhodes to support you and to enable you to succeed.

You will, hopefully, also recognize your parents, guardians, families and benefactors, all of whom have contributed generously to your receiving a Rhodes education and to your graduating this evening.

Leadership

This evening as you leave us, or proceed to higher degrees at Rhodes, I wish to share some thoughts with you on leadership.

One reason for this is that the Rhodes University slogan is, of course, *Where Leaders Learn*. A second reason for talking about leadership is that last week Dr Reuel Khoza, chairperson of Nedbank and a honorary doctoral graduand of Rhodes made reference to the 'emergence of a strange breed of leaders' whose 'moral quotient is degenerating.'¹ He also raised concerns about the extent to which we have an 'accountable democracy,' and suggested that 'we have a duty to...call to book the putative leaders who...cannot lead.'²

A final, and more immediate, reason is that soon Rhodes University will publicly launch a new academic centre - the *Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics*.

The *Centre for Leadership Ethics* is made possible by a renewable R12.5 million grant by Allan Gray, a Rhodes University alumnus and honorary doctoral graduand, a great philanthropist, and the pioneering founder of the Allan Gray investment company.

Sadly, too many who occupy positions of economic, political and administrative power, and are entrusted with the leadership of society and key institutions, are sorely wanting with regard to the core values and conduct that are congruent with ethical, responsible and accountable leadership.

Witness the flagrant abuse of power for political, economic and private gain and self-enrichment, as manifested in corruption, fraud and dubious tenderpreneurial activities, in anti-democratic practices, and the perpetuation of macho masculinities and women's oppression in the name of culture.

Witness, too, the failures on the part of those entrusted with leading critical economic, social, educational and health institutions to grasp fully their profound constitutional, moral and social responsibilities in a society that proclaims a commitment to human dignity, social equity and justice.

Recall how a futile debate on the cause of HIV/AIDS led to a stultifying absence of leadership to deal with the pandemic, and how the tardy response in rolling out anti-retrovirals resulted in unnecessary delays in treatment and the tragic loss of lives.

Recall, too, that we were promised an innovative 'Public Service that will provide an excellent quality of service,' be the 'servant of the people (and be) 'accessible, transparent, accountable, efficient and free of corruption.'³ *Batho Pele* (People First) was to be the watchword of our Public Service.

Instead, in many areas, there is a widespread culture of disdainful conduct and service, sheer indifference to the basic needs of people, and a sore lack of ethical and accountable leadership.

While the economic and political elites of our country have recourse to private and Model C schools, private hospitals and private cars, the poor of our society depend hugely on public services for their basic needs and for improving their lives and those of their children.

The lack of political and administrative leadership and the shortcomings in critical public services undermine the dignity of the poor, retard the educational development of millions of children and youth, thwart the realization of constitutionally and legally enshrined social goals and, ultimately, violate human and social rights.

Indisputably, one of our great challenges is to improve the quality of education in schools. A key distinguishing feature between well-performing and poorly performing schools is effective *leadership*. Our schools cry out for courageous and effective educational leadership on the part of state departments and school heads.

A respected alumnus, Caroline Southey, writes in 'Help, the cops are coming!' that 'a depressing realization is setting in that we are in danger not only from those in civilian clothes – there is an increasing trend for our criminals to sport police uniforms.'

She contends that the tremendous increase in assault investigations and murder cases involving the police is 'symptomatic of a police force that is sans leadership, devoid of a moral compass and feels accountable to no one.'⁴

Our fragile environment, too, continues to suffer because of timid and indecisive leadership. We pursue relentlessly, without effective regulation so-called 'progress' and 'development,' irrespective of the massive degradation of the environment and the hazards of global climate change.

The shenanigans of various businesspersons, politicians and bureaucrats make for riveting, if depressing, reading. Regularly, we are shocked and awed by the brazen sense of 'entitlement,' the glib emphasis on the legal instead of the ethical, and by the impunity with which so-called leaders redeploy resources for private gain and benefit.

Perhaps the pervasiveness of the shortcomings of those in leadership has numbed us into silence. Perhaps we assume that our duties as citizens extend no further than voting every five years. Or perhaps, shocked and awed, or just thoroughly discouraged, we cannot conceive how we, as ordinary citizens, can become agents of change.

But silence is not an option. It simply leaves the door wide open for irresponsible and unaccountable leadership, and a culture of impunity, greed and crass materialism in which self-interest, material wealth, profits, and performance bonuses become the new gods.

We must also not become cynical or despair. Tatamkulu Nelson Mandela writes that 'there were many dark moments when my faith in humanity was sorely tested, but I would not and could not give myself up to despair. That way lays defeat and death.' Instead, we must remain optimistic, keep our 'head pointed toward the sun, (our) feet moving forward.'⁵

In creating the *Allan Gray Centre for Leadership Ethics*, Dr Gray and Rhodes University are of one mind: our vital task is to imaginatively investigate and conceptualise what constitutes ethical and responsible leadership, to promote such leadership in diverse contexts and circumstances, and to also develop education and training initiatives to foster such leadership.

There is no off-the-shelf or 'customised, shrink-wrapped, perfect leadership model.'⁶ It is also unlikely that leadership can be simply taught, or that theory alone or building skills is enough.

Leadership is people acting for ‘positive change;’ is pioneering in both thought and action; is a willingness ‘to take action to address the challenges’ we see around us, is to use knowledge, expertise, skills and networks to ‘change society for the better’ in whatever arena we find ourselves.⁷

In building leadership we must take history, culture and context seriously. We need to develop a situated leadership appropriate to our conditions; and we need to forge leadership that is distributed institutionally, rather than centred on the ‘big man’ – and usually it is the big man!

Given the pressing challenges of poverty and unemployment, hunger and disease, social equity and justice, and deepening and consolidating our democracy, our task is to cultivate, grow and institutionalise ethical, responsible and accountable leadership across our society.

We are blessed to be able to draw inspiration from wonderful role models that provided selfless leadership and paved the long path to our democracy – Luthuli, Mandela, Tutu, Hani, Lillian Ngoyi, Amina Cachalia, Helen Joseph, Oom Beyers Naude and many others: men and women, black and white.

Down to earth, fallible people with good values and *isthunzi* (presence); mindful of people’s aspirations, anguish and needs; with the courage to challenge the status quo and the passion to pursue change; committed to service and perseverance to overcome obstacles; knowing that to lead means doing what is right rather than what is popular among followers.

We can also take inspiration from an emerging generation, the youth of our country – not the pompous, verbose, self-aggrandizing lot who regularly amuse and bemuse us, but those who humble us by their imagination and positive outlook, and by their quiet, committed, and determined striving through numerous projects to secure social justice for all, deepen our democracy, and protect our planet.

Prof. Paul Maylam in his recent book, *Enlightened Rule: Portraits of Six Exceptional Twentieth Century Leaders*, argues that luminous and respected leaders cherish ‘some key fundamental values.’

They believe in the ‘innate worth and dignity of all human beings’ and that leaders ‘bear the responsibility to create conditions in which all humans can realise their potential.’⁸

They have ‘an unwavering commitment to democracy and human rights,’ including ‘popular participation’ and ‘proper access of all to education, health care, personal security’ and ‘social and economic justice.’ They also have a ‘generosity of spirit,’ and an ‘egalitarian spirit,’ and ‘a sense of obligation to further the common good.’⁹

Ethical and responsible leaders also possess certain key qualities. They take learning, education and knowledge seriously. They understand that these are vital for understanding our world, for gaining insight into the real nature of our problems and challenges, and for finding solutions.

They have an unwavering commitment to non-racialism, non-sexism and great respect for difference and diversity: whether related to race, gender, nationality, sexual orientation, language or culture.

They refuse to be paralysed by our history, legacy and contemporary problems. Instead, they inspire us by reminding us of our remarkable ingenuity and courage in fashioning a fabulous Constitution and winning our democracy; they call on us to draw on these to confront our challenges.

At the heart of ethical, responsible and accountable leadership is, of course, *integrity* and *honesty*. Ethical leaders, in the words of the great African leader, Amilcar Cabral, 'tell no lies. Expose lies whenever they are told. Mask no difficulties, mistakes, failures. Claim no easy victories.'

Without integrity, there can be no principled conduct; no prospect of winning trust and inspiring and uniting people around a vision; no effective communication, no ethical and responsible leadership.

But ethical and responsible leaders also look beyond themselves. They see potential all around them, seek to build new generations of leaders who will be better than them, to create opportunities for developing people, to provide them with experiences and space to learn lessons, and strive to be role models by living out values associated with ethical and responsible leadership.

Finally, as the Taoist philosopher, Lao Tzu, writes

The leader is best

When people are hardly aware of his existence

When his work is done, his aim fulfilled

The people say, 'We did it ourselves.'¹⁰

Of course, leaders need committed yet critical supporters, who also act as agents of change, strong institutions and a strong civil society. Leadership, then, becomes everyone's task and responsibility. This is the *real* meaning of the slogan, 'Power to the People.' If not this, we will continue under the yoke of the big men brand of leadership, with all its deficiencies.

It has been noted that 'effectively to give birth to the new, we must be angry at our past.' Given the lack and shortcomings of leadership, perhaps, anger and shame at the present is also justified.

A wonderful Sotho proverb, however, says: 'No matter how hot your anger may be, it cannot cook.' Our challenge is to make the real fire that cooks, to embrace the critical task of producing the competent, responsible and ethical leaders that our society cries out for.

Everyone has the potential to be a leader, for leaders 'are not born with some magic infallible tool kit' but are produced by environments, opportunities, life 'journeys and experiences.'¹¹

Leadership is not inherited or bestowed through patronage, or a function of material wealth, high office, status, or a degree. It must be earned through ethical conduct, impeccable integrity, visionary endeavour, selfless public service, perseverance and commitment to people and responsibilities.

Ladies and gentlemen, you, our graduates, are among the best and brightest of our society. It is to you that we look to lead, to re-imagine and reshape our future, to forge new ways of conducting our affairs, to make human development, people and social justice the vital centre of all our actions.

We look to you to exercise, with humility, leadership wherever you find yourself – in the classrooms and schools of our lands; in the theatres, galleries and concert halls; hospital and clinic dispensaries; in legal practices, prosecution offices and courts; in scientific laboratories and research institutions; in financial services and the public service, and in the media and universities.

Of course, this leadership and your knowledge and expertise must be put to work not only for your private benefit but also for the benefit of society at large, to advance the general public good.

On this issue, here is Penelope Mary Niven, who is graduating with a PhD in Education. Thanking her ‘community of practice,’ the soon to be Dr Niven says to them, ‘this is very much “our” PhD;’ ‘no PhD is written alone, but within communities who talk, laugh, share, tough it out and even suffer a bit together!’

Niven adds that ‘developing trustworthy knowledge is...truly its own justification....It matters that we can say something truthful’ and be as ‘critical’ and ‘emancipatory’ as we can possibly be!’

‘Idealism,’ she says, counts in the end...it’s really about the Big Stuff - truth, knowledge, social change, fairness, the next generation, hope for our educational future. That's what got me limping towards the finish line anyway.’

Spoken like a true Rhodian – that is what it is all about!

In Closing

You, our graduands have had the honour of studying at a very special and distinctive university, one that deservedly commands an enviable academic reputation.

We take pride in our striving to ensure that we are an environment in which knowledge, understanding and the intellect can flower; in being a leading postgraduate and research university that takes undergraduate studies seriously; in enjoying among the best pass and graduation rates in South Africa; in our increasing engagement with local communities; in the pursuit of equity and excellence, and in being a cosmopolitan institution with students from some 56 countries.

Over 3 days, 2 240 students will graduate at 5 graduation ceremonies. 1 333 students will receive undergraduate degrees, and 907, or 40% postgraduate degrees. 1 383 graduates or 62% are women. 445 or 20% are international students from 32 countries in the rest of Africa and from countries around the world. We also celebrate a new University record of 55 PhD's – not bad for the smallest university in the country!

Once you receive your degree, diploma or certificate, you become part of the community of Old Rhodians. I welcome you to this ever-growing and diverse community, and I invite you to visit the alumni table in the Monument foyer to receive a special graduation gift.

In the years ahead we look forward to applauding your successes and achievements as Old Rhodians. We will especially celebrate if as alumni you don't forget your alma mater and contribute generously to our Alumni Annual Fund and other fundraising efforts.

In as much as are an outstanding university and strive to pursue greater heights we are, alas, a relatively poor university. Your support is vital to enable us to educate to the full new generations of students and realize our aspirations.

Today is your day, to remember, to celebrate and cherish. No doubt the parties will extend long into the night and there will be much merriment.

You have earned it and I wish you a wonderful and joyful night (day, night...) of celebration of your achievement and your future promise.

And remember: LEAD!

And lead in a way that when the work is done, the People say

We did it

We did it for ourselves!

¹ <http://www.moneyweb.co.za/mw/view/mw/en/page292516?oid=566137&sn=2009+Detail>

² <http://www.moneyweb.co.za/mw/view/mw/en/page292516?oid=566137&sn=2009+Detail>

³ *White Paper on Reconstruction and Development*, 23 November 1994, Government Gazette, Vol. 353, No. 16085

⁴ *Mail & Guardian*, 23-29 March 2012

⁵ Mandela, N. (1995) *Long Walk to Freedom: Autobiography of Nelson Mandela*

⁶ Tsiba Education (2011) *Perspectives: The Search for Tomorrow's Leaders*. Cape Town: Tsiba Education

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Maylam, P. (2011) *Enlightened Rule: Portraits of Six Exceptional Twentieth Century Leaders*. Bern: Peter Lang

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ <http://www.inspirationalspark.com/leadership-quotes.html>

¹¹ Tsiba Education (2011) *Perspectives: The Search for Tomorrow's Leaders*. Cape Town: Tsiba Education