

Graduation Speech

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all our guests here today - from parents and families to members of the RCN Board, from our partners in Fjaler to representatives from the Norwegian Red Cross and SOS Children's Villages Norway.

I would also like to take this opportunity to give a special welcome to Bertha Camacho – UWC USA alumna and former member of the National Committee of Bolivia, she has spearheaded the National Committee Development team in recent years in her role as International Board member of the UWC movement – and has made a significant contribution to developing the systems behind the selection of our students here today. The last UWC graduation ceremony Bertha attended was her own 21 years ago.

Three flags fly together outside – and we here at RCN are proud of our partnership with the UWC movement, the Red Cross and Norway. Today, the flags inside our auditorium represent the countries of our departing second years – and I am extremely grateful to the two first years who have worked hard this week to ensure that the flags flying represent today's graduates.

The commission to give an address at this graduation is very timely. As some of you will know, I attended my own graduation in early March following the completion of an interdisciplinary Masters programme in Literature and Arts. For I too, in tandem with you, have faced deadlines, wrestled endlessly with footnotes, burnt the midnight oil and suffered the editorial pen of my academic tutors. My dissertation on poetry, grottoes, landscape gardens and female patrons in England in the 1720s will remain a personal achievement in research but utterly lost in the archives of academia and a miracle cure for insomnia for anyone who dares to read it.

The graduation was particularly special with the city caught in golden spring sunlight – it was a day of ceremonial processions, Latin declamation, an excessive amount of bowing, speeches and official photographs. But this was different from previous graduations for me. As part of the ceremony, I temporarily left the Sheldonian in my former academic gown – and was met by my family (Kathini, Phoebe and Poppy) in the courtyard before returning symbolically in a new gown and hood. It was our achievement – without their unstinting support, I would have given up long before. Poppy was born a couple of days after the opening residency of the course and has, from that day, had to share me with postgraduate essay writing and my responsibilities as Rektor of RCN.

With this in mind, I would like to invite our graduates to show their appreciation to their families (here and back home), their host families, and to staff members for the unstinting support they have received over the past two years.

On the back of my graduation programme, there was a single quotation by Aung San Suu Kyi (the Burmese politician and holder of the Rafto and Nobel Peace awards) when she was collecting her honorary degree in Oxford 2012: 'The past is always there, it never goes away, but you can select what is best from the past to help you go forward to the future'. From time to time, you too will pick up your RCN kaleidoscope and images and experiences caught immortal in your memory will help you to draw strength for the next step.

I shall remember you vividly as the students I started with – and I would like to thank you for your support, guidance and generosity of spirit over the past two years. Your legacy as a year group has been to ensure that RCN is a more secure foundation from which students of all profiles can flourish. Picking up my kaleidoscope there have been moments of pure laughter, occasional madness, delight, tears and heartfelt pride when I remember the time we have spent together.

At the beginning of this academic year, Simon Walker spoke to our second years in this auditorium about their footprints. He encouraged all there that day to be sensitive, to be aware, ‘to live consciously...day in day out [David Foster Wallace] and to be responsible for our footprints – for it is imperative that we tread thoughtfully in pursuit of our own dreams and tread carefully in the territory of other people’s dreams.

It has been our responsibility as staff here at RCN to accompany you on your journey so far – not as your friends but as your guides, charged by your families at home to help steer you to this day. A good teacher, a good guide is one who makes himself or herself ‘progressively unnecessary’ [Thomas Carruthers].

What sustains us as educators is hope – hope that you, aware of the unique privilege of a UWC education, in turn give back in some shape or form and strive, throughout your lives, to build a peaceful and more sustainable future.

Christian Bekker, the owner of Bekker House and the land on which the Rehabilitation Centre and the College now stand, gave his whole estate to the Sogn og Fjordane Red Cross in his will of 1976 - outlining that he wished it to be used for ‘the encouragement, pleasure and inspiration for [other] young people with an urge and ability to contribute later in life’.

This is our hope.

A Norwegian born in Madagascar, he saw the potential of the beautiful bay at Haugland in the midst of the Norwegian fjords – and I hope he would be proud to see what has been created here under the Red Cross banner.

Both geographically and metaphorically, Red Cross Nordic at Haugland stands as a natural harbour for you for two years and strives to provide safe and secure anchorage – a place for sea trials, a place to lose your bearings (and to find them again), a place to charter new waters, and to connect with different cultures.

It is important that we teach you to test yourselves in order that you acquire the skills necessary to navigate through dangers and deceptions. Here at RCN we aim not just to teach you the names of the stars but how to read and navigate by them. We invite our students to be map makers, to sound the waters, to voyage out away from the trade routes and discover new frontiers – equipped with a moral compass, a logbook of experience and a pioneering sense of adventure.

On the north side of Dalsfjord, on the road to Holmedal and Askvoll, stands a statue of a Norwegian viking, Ingolfr Arnarson – he stands with the natural frontier of ancient mountains behind him looking out towards the sea and beyond. At his side the Icelandic sculptor has carved the mythological Valkyries – charged with instilling faith into this Viking explorer. A picture of the monument has been put on the front cover of today's graduation programme. In the 9th century, he too left the security of this place as a sea rover and headed west to found the settlement of Reykavik in Iceland - and unintentionally to make history.

The Vikings have often been misunderstood – in many ways, they were the 'first intercontinental peace mission to cross the Atlantic between the Old and the New World' [Thor Heyerdahl]. In old Norse, the word *viking* derives from the feminine *vík*, meaning 'creek, inlet, small bay' and referred to the seamen and warriors who took part in expeditions overseas. You too, like Ingolfr Arnason and the other Vikings from Dalsfjord and Flekkefjord before you, are set to head out, from the safety and security of the bay, on expeditions overseas.

And you will not be 'alone on the surface / Of a turning planet' [RS Thomas]. Friendships forged here will sustain you on your adventures. It was Hilaire Belloc, the French poet, who perceptively noted: 'From quiet homes and first beginning, out to the undiscovered ends, / There's nothing worth the wear of winning, but laughter and the love of friends.'

This is undoubtedly an exciting time for our graduates, with new frontiers to cross and important challenges on the horizon. For all of you, in some sense, it is a journey into the unknown, into risk – towards life's improbabilities. What you learn about yourself and your friends along the way is at the heart of the experience - and I am certain that the invaluable friendships forged here will nourish you for many years to come. My second year English Literature set painstakingly read and analysed every line of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, his Nordic play, in class this year – and will remember Polonius' wise counsel of grappling your friends 'unto thy soul with hoops of steel'.

In the spirit of Kurt Hahn, we hope that we have encouraged you to develop 'an enterprising curiosity, an indefatigable spirit, tenacity in pursuit,...and above all, compassion.' But, on the journey ahead, beware the trappings of entitlement, cynicism, hypocrisy, unkindness and the untimely desertion of humility.

Graduation marks simultaneously the end of one chapter and the beginning of another. As the bus pulls out this afternoon, please take a moment to reflect on the magic of the place – and, at the same time, reflect that you are a part of a larger, compelling hope which radiates today from our vik, our fjord.

I would like to finish this afternoon's address by drawing upon the wisdom of Nelson Mandela, our former UWC Honorary President: 'What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead'. Mandela so astutely captured a meaningfulness to life when he spoke at his friend and fellow UWC parent, Walter Sisulu's 90th birthday celebration in Johannesburg in 2002.

The difference we have made to the lives of others – to our families, to our friends, to strangers we have met – define who we are.

It has been a great privilege to be your Rektor.

Richard D A Lamont

Rektor

24th May 2014