

Graduation Speech 2016

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all our guests here today - from parents, families and host 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 our guest of honour, Marianne Andresen. Marianne has been one of the College's staunchest supporters since the very beginning – from contributing to the architecture of the College and its future to acting as an Oslo 'host mother' to some of our winter programme students graduating this afternoon. Generation after generation of RCN students have benefited from your thoughtful contributions and gentle suggestions to the development of the College.

In this afternoon's address, I draw 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'.

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. Marianne, you have been a lionhearted champion of our College for over twenty years and it is a great privilege to welcome you to your first graduation ceremony.

Today is a day of great celebration. After the fast and challenging pace of the RCN experience, today is a day for turning back momentarily and allowing a heartfelt joy to catch up with our graduates. From the national flags to the potentially embarrassing Swedish placards in the auditorium today, from the colour and vibrancy of global national dress to the last precious seconds of your time here on campus.

As part of Student Introduction Week, we invited you to sit here in the auditorium one evening and write a letter to yourself either in English or, if appropriate, your native language and to outline confidentially your feelings, your concerns, your dreams and sage advice to yourself as you embarked on your RCN journey. We have kept them sealed and undisturbed – and we shall hand the letter back to you when you come later to pick up your RCN diploma.

The Norwegians have a lovely expression of 'Å møte seg selv i døra' ('meeting oneself in the doorway'). This letter, we hope, connects the student you have become at the point of departing the door of RCN with the student you were on arrival. As you return to your seat or find a quiet moment later today, I trust that you can read your letter with pride as to what you have achieved in your time at this College.

I hope that during the course of today you also find a moment to think of your loved ones unable to be here today whose unstinting support, daily sacrifices, and dreams for your futures have guided you to this point. It is your achievement; it is their achievement.

One of my second year English Literature class wrote a dedication on the opening page of his first written assignment back in September 2014 – not to his former English teacher as I first thought when marking it but to his mother for introducing him to the magical world of reading. A poignant, thoughtful reflection from a student embarking on his RCN adventure.

It strikes me as deeply important that we take a moment to think of and thank those other members of our families and friends back at home – they are with us in spirit today.

I would also like to take this opportunity to pause for a moment to think of Tom Gresvig, one of the founding members of this College, who passed away in early January.

Without his immeasurable contribution, RCN would simply not exist. Tom's commitment to the College and its development never wavered - even during his illness. For a Rektor, a founding figure can sometimes seem and sometimes prove intrusive, bobbing menacingly on the horizon and handcuffed to the past but Tom understood that 'our future must be greater than our past' [Ben Okri]. His support was wholehearted and his capacity for new ideas, new projects unparalleled.

He deeply loved this College and made an extraordinary contribution to the past, present and future generations of students – and it is fitting that we salute his commitment on this special occasion. I am delighted one of his sons, Håkon, is here today to represent the Gresvig family.

Each of us here today will have our own personal and unique thoughts of those who have supported us along the way and we shall, I am certain, treasure them.

This is an opportunity for me to invite our graduates to show their appreciation to their families (here and back home), their host families, our founders and supporters, and to the Education and Support Staff for the unstinting support they have received on the road so far.

At the opening College meeting of this academic year, I put two slides up: one drawing your attention to the wisdom of Aristotle 'Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all': the other a photograph of Haja from Western Sahara holding up a snowball in the shape of a heart with the simple message attached: 'Be Kind'.

We hope that here at RCN we have contributed to educating your minds and your hearts – and encouraged you, at all times, to be kind to others and to tread thoughtfully in pursuit of your own dreams and to tread carefully in the territory of other people’s dreams.

Living our daily lives by the values of UWC in a deliberately diverse community is invigorating but also undoubtedly challenging – genuine understanding and wholehearted subscription are not immediate. These are values to be experienced, to be tested and, we hope, to be respected and treasured in the years ahead.

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 and National Committees to help steer you to this day. A good teacher, a good guide is one who makes himself or herself ‘progressively unnecessary’ [Thomas Carruthers].

This is undoubtedly an exciting time for our graduates, with new paths ahead, 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 with fellow students will nourish you for many years to come.

From time to time, you will pick up your RCN kaleidoscope full of images and experiences caught immortal in your memory.

I have many special memories of your year group over the past two years but my absolute favourite was the day that we set a new tradition at the College on the first of May in 2015 – captured on the front page of today’s programme. Saddened by the fact that I had met a number of alumni who admitted that they had never climbed Jarstadheia and not experienced the majestic splendour of the view until, a decade on, they returned for their reunion as alumni, I tentatively suggested that as a community we climb on Labour Day to the top of the mountain which towers protectively above the campus. I sensed in the days building up to the adventure that there were pockets of resistance around the campus – not everyone subscribes to the Everest Mountaineer George Mallory’s ‘Because it’s there’ approach to climbing mountains.

I sensed something different as Kathini, Poppy and I walked down from Teachers’ Hill to the starting point on the morning of the adventure and, to my surprise, found the then first years there in full force. They had, to my delight, interpreted this challenge as their ‘Everest’ – and, in tribute to the pride we take in inclusion at RCN, had organised support teams to ensure that all students in the year group – including all the students on our Survivors of Conflict Programme made it to the snowy ridge top. It is no coincidence that the cover photo of the College’s Strategy 2020, launched last September on the day of our 20 year Jubilee, captures the moment of one support

team successfully cresting the ridge with friends pouring down the mountainside to give the final encouragement for the final steps.

It was a moment to be proud of for student and staff alike on our mountain that day – and a reminder that this is part of the education we all receive here. We hope, of course, that you will be the ethical leaders of tomorrow and champions of UWC and Red Cross values – but, most importantly, that you value those around you and celebrate and support all their differences and recognise the resourcefulness in all.

Your legacy as a year group has been to ensure that RCN is a more inclusive campus in which students of all profiles can flourish.

This memory and many others will help you to draw strength and courage for the next step beyond the secure and supportive world of Red Cross Nordic.

We have recently been celebrating on campus the 400th anniversary of those literary colossuses, Shakespeare and Cervantes. I stumbled upon two lovely lines from Shakespeare (surprisingly in the inflight magazine of Scandinavian airways) earlier this year:

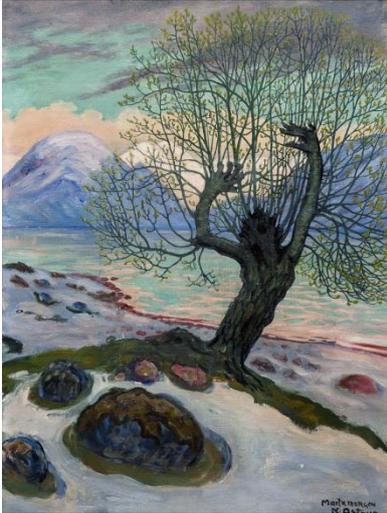
‘How far that little candle throws his beams! / So shines a good deed in a naughty world’

In the years to come, we trust that you remember these words of Portia in ‘The Merchant of Venice’ - and, on the journey ahead, beware the trappings of entitlement, selfishness, unkindness, self-righteousness and the ‘narcissism of small differences’ [Freud].

A few days ago, an exhibition closed which celebrated the work of a Norwegian artist Nikolai Astrup - a unique and innovative artist from the early twentieth century. Her Majesty Queen Sonja, our patron, opened the exhibition in London in mid-February.

Astrup, as an artist, rejected conventional, aerial perspectives for a more immersive, immediate view. His paintings reflected personal responses to places that meant a great deal to him. In fact, his subject matter was Jølster, a beautiful valley to the west of Førde - and his paintings show an imagining and reimagining of this valley with its wild, magical and dreamlike landscape – mountains, waterfalls, Nordic lights, golden summer nights, and folklore.

Here was a local artist who captured the drama of our landscape, the changing seasons and the fragile human community surrounded by sublime nature.



For the past two years, you have all been part of this landscape and you each – in the tradition of Astrup – have your own immersive, immediate and unique view of the your time here. Wherever the different chapters of your life are set, you will not forget your time in the fjords and the indelible impression of this landscape, of this place.

Cherish your memories.

On the inside of today's programme, there is a reproduction of an Astrup oil painting which captures a spring morning - the snow on the distant mountains and in the foreground - and by the water's edge - a deep rooted tree bursting into a yellow blossom.

The distinctly human form of the tree reminds us of the challenges you have faced along the way here – including dislocation from your home contexts, two Norwegian winters, treacherous ice on the pathways of RCN, relentless academic deadlines and exams. 'Nobody said it was easy' [Coldplay – to be sung later as a student performance]

Graduation is one of our rites of spring - as with Astrup's luminous willow tree, you have put down roots here at RCN that will nourish you for many years to come, you have emerged from seasonal darkness into light, sensed springtime and, at this moment, turned into these 'darling [yellow] buds of May'.

A lifelong friend sent me a poem by Primo Levi, the Italian writer, the night before our wedding last July - and I draw upon it now:

'Each of us bears the imprint / Of a friend met along the way; / In each the trace of each'

This afternoon, there will undoubtedly be tears of sadness, of relief, of exhaustion and of happiness – and you will have that sense of 'half turn[ing] to go yet turning stay' [Christina Rossetti]. And as the bus this evening bumps over the familiar road to Flekke, please take a moment to reflect on the magic of the place, and of the imprints of people met along the way, 'in each a trace of each'.

Richard D A Lamont
 Rektor
 UWC Red Cross Nordic