

Graduation Speech 2017 – Welcome Address

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, from members of UWC National Committees to representatives of Foundations committed to supporting RCN students.

I would also like to take this opportunity to give a special welcome to our guest of honour, Hans Von Sponeck.

Hans was last here in the snows of January in 2016 when he kindly came to open RCN's Model United Nations. He has served as a UN Assistant Secretary-General and Humanitarian Coordinator for Iraq and has won several international prizes for his work towards peace. He is a staunch supporter of UWC and has worked tirelessly over the years to enable students from Iraq to attend our schools and colleges. Mohammed and Sara joined our Red Cross Survivors of Conflict programme as a result of Hans' foresight – and he sits here this afternoon in support of Mohammed as a member of this graduating class.

I have invited Hans to speak as part of this afternoon's programme on the world you will be heading out to – exciting, challenging, and uncertain. Hans wrote to me just before last Christmas with this message: 'If I had a wish for 2017 it would be that by law every one of the 193 UN member countries should have at least one UWC school. I am convinced that the seeds produced would help our confused world to become more sane and peaceful'.

A true endorsement of our mission to work towards a more peaceful and sustainable future.

Thank you, Hans, for kindly offering to give the farewell address to this year's graduates – it is a great privilege to welcome you again to our College.

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.

It is an emotionally charged day for us all.

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times' [Dickens – 'A Tale of Two Cities']

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 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, we 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 whose unstinting support, daily sacrifices, and dreams for your futures have guided you to this point. It is your achievement; it is their achievement.

They are with us in spirit today.

One of my favourite moments of this year was at the very end of the last College Meeting in this auditorium before the Christmas break when the first and second years rose spontaneously as one body to applaud the staff for their support during the course of what is a challenging term. It was deeply touching for all members of staff present – and unprecedented in my experience as Rektor as an expression of thanks.

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 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 power-point slides up: one challenging us, in the spirit of the summer 2016 Olympics, to 'seek to do, and be, the best we can'; and the other with the guiding words of the Dalai Lama: 'Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible.'

We hope that here at RCN we have contributed towards you being the best you can be – 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 and the Red Cross 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 valued as touchstones in the years ahead.

You will have certainly learnt, through the experience, that UWC is not a paradise on earth; we, of course, have our imperfections. In fact, we need our imperfections to root us in reality and, through dialogue, empathy and trust, to navigate values and responsibilities - and to strive collectively to build a deliberately diverse and safe community.

In one of the Semester at Sea applications this year, one second year perceptively wrote: 'Taking part in a community is a gift, but [it also] comes with a responsibility which I am willing take'.

For me, the best ingredient of a UWC community is the importance and development of humility; the worst is unbridled entitlement. Please beware the goblin of entitlement clicking its fingers in your ears in the years to come.

On this note, I would like to turn to some staff members for whom this also is an emotional day - and to take a moment to thank Edmund and Angie for your wonderful work as role models of humility, compassion and integrity. We wish you the very best for the adventures ahead on your two year leave of absence.

Reidun, Vidar and Arne Ophaug also retire this summer after giving extraordinary contributions to RCN since it was founded. All three of you have individually enriched our world - all role models to the service and support of others - and we shall miss you.

It is appropriate that together we thank them for their tireless and generous contributions to RCN.

This is 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.

In my first year as Rektor, the Chair of the RCN Council - Pär Stenbäck - invited me to Helsinki to meet and connect with our supporters there. As part of the programme, we had dinner in a strangely deserted Russian restaurant - Ravintola Bellevue. My main recollection of the meal was of an orchestral version on surreal repeat of a Russian song '*Dorogoi dlinnoyu*' ['Дорогой длинною' - which translates as 'By the Long Road']. It was covered in the late 1960s with English lyrics and was used, more recently and controversially, as the soundtrack for an advert satirising Robert Mugabe by the mischievous Nando's fast food marketing department.

I have commissioned the RCN choir to sing it here this afternoon as a reminder to our second years of the days gone by and the days ahead - and the power of friendships forged through UWC.

Listen carefully later to the lyrics and you will hear:

'Remember how we laughed away the hours / And dreamed of all the great things we could do'

And the singer's recognition of change:

'Then the busy years went rushing by us / We lost our starry notions on the way'

And the moment in the song, when the singer - a little lost and lonely in later life - finds herself stumbling upon an old friend:

'Through the door there came familiar laughter / I saw your face and heard you call my name / For in our hearts the dreams are still the same'.

You have developed here at RCN both intercultural understanding, a shared humanity and a global friendship network which will serve, stimulate and support you for the rest of your lives. From time to time, you 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.

Diversity is our strength.

The event on Wednesday is a reminder of the impact you as students have on our local community. Norwegians take very seriously their National Day on 17th May – from televised processions in front of the Royal Palace in Oslo to village events.

Participation in the annual procession in Flekke is expected and essential. The local brass band in front, followed by the flag-waving school children and adults dressed in their regional *bunads* (national dress), a rendition of the national anthem (*'Ja, vi elsker dette landet'*) and speeches.

What makes this a very special occasion is the development over twenty-two years of the inclusion of the Red Cross Nordic students in the parade – in Flekke and Dale it has become, for both young and old, a celebration of Norwegian identity but also a celebration of diversity and cultural difference.

This should not be underestimated. In other parts of Norway, tensions simmer on the 17th May with flags of other nationalities actively discouraged.

You have helped the College to develop a reputation both globally, across the UWC movement, and locally as a lighthouse for inclusion – a fitting image for a college on the west coast of Norway.

There are some of you who have been here for three years including a Foundation Year and I would like to take this opportunity to thank you – Melvin, Mohammed and Elias – for enriching our lives here at RCN.

And I would like to make special mention of Belen who learnt our campus with her sister as guide in the summer course of 2015 and has inspired us all on a daily basis since her arrival.

An essential part of the education you and we receive at RCN is that we learn to value those around us and celebrate and support all their differences and recognise the resourcefulness in all.

There is one final person I would like to mention – Tove Veierød – who steps down as Chair of the RCN Board at the end of this term.

I draw upon the wisdom of Maya Angelou, the American writer and civil rights activist: 'I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel'.

We – board members, staff and students – shall not forget your invaluable contribution to the architecture of RCN – past, present and future – and we shall certainly not forget, with your kind, graceful and generous approach, 'how you made [us] feel'.

The picture on the front cover of today's programme is a reproduction of the painting of our fjord that we gave Tove on behalf of the College at our April Council Meeting.

I have invited Tove to give the last word at today's graduation ceremony but first would like to invite her up to receive a bouquet of flowers from Oliver, the incoming Student Rep on our Board, on behalf of all those gathered here today.

What sustains supporters like Tove and us as educators at RCN 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.

This is our hope.

Many of you will recognise the compelling opening lines of Charles Dickens' 'A Tale of Two Cities':

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness...it was the season of Darkness, it was the season of Light, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us....'

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, at the same time, reflect that you are a part of a larger, compelling hope which radiates today from our fjord.

You have everything before you.

It [is] the worst of times, it [is] the best of times.

Richard D A Lamont
Rektor
20th May 2017

