GRADUATION ADDRESS – RHODES – 2018

Thank you, very much, to the Public Orator, Distinguished Professor Paul R. Maylam, for that tear-jerking but definitely most generous introduction. [YOU ALL CAN WIPE OF THAT LOOK OF SURPRISE ON YOUR FACES, YOU’RE NO MORE SURPRISED THAN I AM!] Impromptu, because I was teary from the introduction!]

My heartfelt thanks to the Council of Rhodes University for conferring such an honour on me and

congratulations to my most worthy fellow honorees: Professor Padayaachi; Professor Peter Mtuze; Yvonne Chakachaka; the Honorable Justice Dikgang Moseneke; and Dr Andrew Mlangeni.

Since we’ve been made aware of his presence, let me acknowledge/ndikhahlele kuMnuzana ophakathi kwethu, uNkos’uHolomisa. Mhlekazi, kuwe nosapho sibhotisa sisisthi: Aa, Dilizintaba!

But this day is about you - the young people here gathered, to whom most praise goes, for staying the course, for the part you have played – paying heed to the advice, nurturing, teachings, leadership – but, most of all, for refusing to be part of the sad statistics of this country – the criminally high dropout rate at school and university levels.

Now, take heed. This, Rhodes University’s 114th graduation – coincides with a remarkable year – the centenary of our Founding Father’s birth. Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, Aa Dalibhunga! Would have been one hundred years, this year.

I recall this, bring it to your notice, because singabantu ababala iminyaka yobudoda ngezilimela. Sithiya abantwana amagama ngeziganeko. Nina ke, ningabantwana/ulutsha oluphuma kumfutho wemfundo ngalo nyaka unje ukugqaleka kwiminyaka yesizwe enisiso – Madiba’s centenary.

This alignment of a life to an event, this acknowledgment of the connectedness of things that may, taken at face value, seem disparate, unconnected, unaligned – reminds us how intricately interwoven are the elements that form all life. It reminds us we are not – as individuals - and never will be till the day we die - wholly independent. We live because there are all sorts of things that are not only life giving but life supporting. Those, including not only other human beings for sure. However, they also include the air we breathe, the water, fire, earth/ground on which we walk, plant our food, bury our dead, erect buildings on, build rail and road –the animals, both domestic and wild – these and more – oh, so much more - all, all, are part of each and every one of you, of us. Did you know a greater percentage than not of your gene pool is the same as that of the elephant and that of the ant? The design is perfect.

That brings us to our nature – the who-ness of us: who we are, whence we are, and why we are:

**Being**

**Because it pleases our Maker**

**We have no choice**

**In the fashion of our making.**

**The sentence, for our being,**

**Is choice**

**In the manner of our living.**

Choice – now, let’s talk about choice: this is how you exercise your “sentence” – the only demand or expectation for the gift of your life – that you mind it in its entirety. Unlike vegetation, you have free will or choice.

But to what purpose? Why have you been given this free gift/your life? I can think of no better answer to that question than was given, in 1945, by Eleanor Roosevelt – UN General Assembly: “We are all in this world for one reason, and one reason only … to leave the world a better place than we found it.”

You have already made a few good choices in your young life. The choice to stay in school, work hard enough to stand here today, graduating. Again, congratulations! The choice to study the Humanities: a discipline to study human beings and what they are about. You have taken courses that seek to enable you to understand and record the world.

Today, Rhodes University affirms You have the tools. But this is just the beginning – not the end of the journey as you might have thought. Now, some of you have to decide on career paths; on life partners; on where you will make your home – now that you’ve gone through these rites of passage, you truly enter the House of Adulthood, forever leaving that of Childhood. You are fully grown.

Choice: Make the choice to live a worthy life.

Leave footsteps like the man whose centenary we observe this year. Try and create the world you would want to live in. Serve and minister to the world. Stand up for what you believe in; and remember, all things worthwhile take time and perseverance to achieve. Change is never instantaneous. Do not go for immediate gratification. Learn to listen, especially to those with whom you do not agree. Never believe you are the sole holder of all truth but be humble and willing to learn even from the dullard, the sluggard, the one who always brings the rear in any race or competition. They too are here for a reason.

Remember your predecessors, Generation 1976. Do not let them weep, seeing their sacrifice as having been in vain. Honour that sacrifice; seize the future.

You have those who came before you in this very institution – Notable Alumni such as: Diane Awerbuck; Alex Boraine; Guy Butler; Achmat Dangor; K. Sello Duiker; Allan Gray; Chris Hani; Margaret Legum; Marguerite Poland; Ian Smith; Wilbur Smith; Barry Streek – to name but a few. Will your name join the ranks? If not, why not?

This is a time of unprecedented happenings. The future of the country is in your hands. And, God knows, the need is huge for willing hearts and capable hands – that great the lacunae: children are still dying in shit (excuse my French!) This, in the twenty-first century, we still have schools with pit toilets! Reading scores are the nation’s shame: grade four learners have no comprehension of what they read. We lead the world in nefarious categories: new HIV infections and Aids stats; poverty is rampant and seemingly incurable, unbeatable. You have studied people and how they do the business called living. The people of your country need help. The university says it has armed you with the skills and knowledge that can do that job. Go out into the world, armed with that knowledge and those skills – and serve your nations. Today, we celebrate you because it is in your hands that we can place the future of not only this country, this nation, but of this world.

What will future generations say of you?

Be of count

How you ask?

It is by using the God-given gifts, you came bearing to the world. You hold, in you, such fantastic abilities as you will never dream of. Remember who you are, whence you are. The same God who made the stars, made you. You are here for a reason; never to forget that.

Live in Awareness of the Awe you are; from Awe you were cleaved and part thereof forever remain.

Perfect, you come to the world – choose to live fully, in awareness of that perfection you are; honour it by minding it, guarding it, employing it with purpose toward the fulfilment of your destiny. For, the Universe is not wasteful, were you not needed, essential, you would not have been created – your life, freely given, a gift; the only price, the sentence for being: that you live responsibly. Live purposively. Live productively – so that you claim to live and not just be alive.

Every living thing is alive but few, the select, live and live fully; using all they are, they have, to the betterment of their fellow humans. To live your life in such a way that others wonder how their lives would have been without your contribution: Now, that is what is called a life well lived. Some examples: Florence Nightingale; Madame Curie; Desmond Tutu; the Wrights brothers, our own Madiba.

You, are born Free – thanks to 1994 and what it brought this country, this nation. That event, the death of apartheid, was so unexpected, so prayed for, so sought … but it took us all by surprise. I haven’t met one person, including those who fought valiantly and tirelessly, for the end of apartheid, who has said they had foreseen the end of apartheid during their lifetime. Apartheid seemed so entrenched, such a monolith, no one thought it would ever end, certainly not for centuries to come – perhaps. But, as we saw the unbelievable happen, apartheid crumble before our eyes, I was moved to do something I had never done before. I used to write poems but was too timid to call myself a poet. But, toward the end of 1993 or the beginning of 1994, I read, publicly at a café in New York City, a poem. That is how much I was moved by what I witnessed and feared. Oh, no! I wanted to see apartheid end … but I feared its end and what it would not bring. I saw the huge expectation written on faces of all, especially the destitute, the poorest of the poor. But, because I had seen that political transformation is not social transformation, I felt fearful, could not but be fearful … for the huge disappointment I knew, was certain, would come. [READ POEM: FEAR OF CHANGE - attached]

Look at what happened in the United States of America. The Civil Rights Movement won political freedom for the oppressed and downtrodden of that nation. However, see who crawled out of holes and makeshift shelters, looking bedraggled, sad, a totally devoid of hope: the same who was poor and bedraggled during the fight for freedom. Winning civil rights had not delivered social freedom. Political liberation is not freedom from poverty, from want, from disease and lack of good education. All it does it, to some extent, give one the leeway to fight for those liberties. To you, the nation’s newest graduates, I say: Build on what the previous generation achieved. Do not look down on it or belittle it – it was bought with blood – with life, sometimes. It was not delivered on a silver platter. Respect it and honour it. Then do what still needs to be done. Roll up your sleeves and fight for social change for that is what will complement and complete the work that is still before this nation.

You, graduate in 2018, the centenary of our Founding Father

A year singularly marked

What then hidden link

You share with him thus remembered?

Is it his courage you inherit?

His resilience under strife?

Humility before great temptation for ostentatiousness?

Huge heart that grudge forsakes

Pursuing in its stead, for the greater good,

Peace, harmony, through reconciliation?

What choices will you make?

Choose to be unafraid

Trust your gut instinct

You will make mistakes

Pray you never a make mistake you cannot rectify.

Choose to err on the side of justice; of righteousness

Carry what power you have with graciousness

The world will judge you not on how you treat those above you

But on how you behave towards the weaker

Be magnanimous and humble

Choose forgiveness over vindictiveness

Be wary of loud, unsolicited counsel

Listen to the advice from the deep recesses of your heart

So that when you make mistakes, they will be your mistakes

And not the mistakes of the loud, misinformed; the ignorant or idle

Choose to go to the end of life growing, learning, loving yourself

For, in the final analysis, you are all you really have.

Respect yourself; Respect all others; Respect the Environment

That sustains you and all life and without which you would cease to be.

In conclusion: It is my fervent hope that you will treasure, into the long-distant future, the bonds you have formed at this university, now you alma mater. Support those who will come after you by joining the Alumni Network so that your children and grandchildren join the family of Rhodians – and make Rhodes University part of the history of your family.

Good luck! And, thank you, all. Thank you, very, very much!