

UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE GRADUATION CEREMONY

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KEYNOTE ADDRESS

By Lim Siong Guan

May I first offer my congratulations to all who are graduating today from one of Australia's oldest and finest universities. It is not an event to be taken lightly, and it is not an end, only just a beginning. May you find purpose in life and work, and find worthy opportunities to contribute to society and pass on happiness to family, friends and colleagues.

I wish especially to thank the University of Adelaide for honouring me with the Distinguished Alumni Award. It is recognition I very much appreciate, less for what I have been able to accomplish than as testimony of the many opportunities that had come to me to make a difference. I thank God for the many openings I have had to live out in real life what the late Dr Goh Keng Swee, Singapore's First Deputy Prime Minister had said: "The only way to avoid making mistakes is not to do anything, and that, in the final analysis, will be the ultimate mistake."

It is very much a privilege for me to be invited to make this short address. I graduated from the University of Adelaide in 1969. That is practically a different world from today where things move so fast, the future appears more unpredictable and uncertain than ever, and life is a continuous push to stay ahead. But it is an illusion to think that today is more difficult than the past—it is simply different. Life moves on with all its ebbs and flows, and the key to happiness and success lies with those who are able to live with the ambiguous and the unexpected and the uncomfortable and continuous change. When I left for Adelaide in 1965, Singapore had merged into Malaysia for just over a year. But only months later, Singapore was out of Malaysia. Things could not have been more uncertain, unexpected and uncomfortable. But it is a world which the young people today cannot be blamed for not being able to feel or sense.

My father was a taxi driver, my mother a teacher. It was clear to me there was no way I was going to get to university without a scholarship. Certainly scholarships and bursaries and loans were a lot scarcer then. I applied for several scholarships and landed one under the Colombo Plan generously donated by the Australian Government and awarded by the Singapore Public Service Commission. I was prepared to do any course they were prepared to give me a scholarship for. They were not days like today where young people can pick and choose and demand what they want to study.

My flight to Australia was the first time ever I was in a plane. I remember when the plane first broke through the clouds: the sight was so exhilarating, a new world of adventure and hope. I studied mechanical engineering because, truth be told, that was the offer for a scholarship. They were still the early days of industrialization in Singapore.

When I returned, under bond to the Singapore Government, I was posted to the Sewerage Branch of the Public Works Department. This function is now undertaken by the Public Utilities Board. I can tell you it was not the most pleasant of assignments, breathing and

managing the systems that allow your toilet and bathrooms to work in what you may call a "more civilised" way. You might think I would have been miserable. I was not, because it was a whole new world of new experience. The moral of my story: there is always something new to learn in every situation. Some things you can master in 3 months, other things you cannot master in 3 years, and a few things you can keep reinventing and renewing such that they never get done even in 30 years. If you keep choosing what you want to do, you will be confining yourself to the world you know, and miss the opportunity to learn things you never knew about.

When I reported for my first day of work at the Kim Chuan Sewage Treatment Works, I noticed a couple of men painting a road roller which obviously had not been used for some time. Once in the office I asked why the road roller was being painted the normal grey of such equipment. I was told it was because the road roller was being "condemned", a term used to describe the retirement of the equipment so a replacement could be bought. The answer, of course, deepened the mystery. Why spend the effort to paint a piece of equipment which was being discarded? "Oh," the answer came, "the 'certificate of condemnation' has to be signed by an engineer from the mechanical engineering branch. If he saw the rusting equipment, he would say we caused the equipment's sorry state because we did not take care of it." In other words, it was a hopeless piece of equipment. So they had left it in the rain unused and rusting. Then after a decent interval, they painted it up so they would not get blamed for the state of disrepair. This way, everyone wins. The engineer would feel fine to issue the "condemnation certificate". The workers were happy they could now look forward to a good machine. The moral of this story: the people on the ground are much smarter than you think. So walk the ground. Don't stay in the office without knowing the true situation. If your people see you willing to get your hands dirty, they will respect you for caring and understanding.

I was in the Sewerage Branch for only a year before being transferred to the Ministry of Defence. No one asked me whether I wanted to go. Dr Goh Keng Swee simply decided that should be. The Singapore Armed Forces was on an accelerated growth path. I was appointed project director to coordinate the establishment of the first anti-aircraft gun battalion. What did I know about anti-aircraft guns? Nothing. But I was prepared to learn. Next I was made project director of the Junior Flying Club, now known as the Youth Flying Club. What did I know about planes and flying? Nothing. But I was willing to learn. And I was able to gain the confidence of the people involved that I had no desire to take away their credits: I was there purely to facilitate their work and coordinate their efforts. The moral of the story: help others succeed. Continually ask the question: How can I help you do your job better?

I was made General Manager of Singapore Automotive Engineering, now a division of ST Kinetics, at the age of 24. Energy and curiosity and a desire to learn and to contribute made up for my lack of specific skills and industrial knowledge. And ignorance and naiveté helped make the difficult, achievable. A string of appointments followed. As Director Logistics, then Director Finance in Mindef; then the first Principal Private Secretary for then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew; then Permanent Secretary successively in the Ministry of Defence, the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Education and finally the Ministry of Finance from which I retired from the Civil Service in 2006. I also served 5 years as the Head of the Civil Service. The moral of my story: integrity, trustworthiness, reliability, energy, imagination and a

continuous drive for excellence attract to you opportunities to learn, to serve and to contribute. Don't chase the rewards; chase the opportunities.

When I retired from the Civil Service, I was asked first to chair the Economic Development Board and then to be Group President of the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation. Each has been a wonderful opportunity to lead, to help people grow to their potential, to help organizations become more than they ever imagined themselves possible. To be able to garner together the energy and creativity of everyone is to never focus on oneself but to always look out for the good of others. Leadership requires knowledge and experience but, most of all, it requires an other-centredness that comes from the inside of you. Lao Tze, the ancient Chinese philosopher, is reputed to have said, "As for the best leaders, the people do not notice their existence. The next best, the people honour and praise. The next, the people fear; and the next, the people hate..When the best leader's work is done the people say, 'We did it ourselves!'"

As I wish you, the new graduates, the very best for your journey of life, may I simply say, "Seek to be the best you can be." Anything less is less than fair to yourself and to your capacity to contribute to the well-being of the people around you. Build a reputation for hard work, integrity, trustworthiness and reliability. Opportunity comes to those who are able, ready and prepared. Use your brain, use your hands, use your heart. Your degree today is not the end of your hard work. Your degree gives you a new starting point to apply hard work to bigger ends and higher ends. Enjoy today. Tomorrow brings you new possibilities and more work. Good luck and God bless you.