

**Phil De Young**  
**Graduation address, May 2017**

Thanks for the very generous introduction.

And thanks for the invitation to be the guest speaker at this prestigious event. I am truly honoured and most humbled.

From the outset, I heartily congratulate all those who received graduation certificates this morning. Well done.

As you have just heard, I have had a very long association with Monash University and, as a consequence, I feel very much at home here today.

Both my wife and I owe much to Monash. The two of us each hold two tertiary qualifications from this University and forged our professional lives on the foundation of these qualifications.

We also made many life-long friends from our days at Monash and still socialise with them frequently.

And just to put icing on the cake, we married in the Religious Centre some 100 metres from here a little over 46 years ago.

The place has changed dramatically in terms of infrastructure since the infancy days of the Sixties but the values that underpin the academic and non-academic offerings appear to be the same as when we commenced in 1965. And to me this is a significant plus.

So what does one say at an occasion like this? What advice does one offer? What clichés does one roll out?

Well, I'll try not to be patronising and I hope to avoid the usual clichés. And I'll try to keep in mind that in reality I'm just an old bloke from yesteryear speaking to an audience comprising a majority of people who are one third my age.

I'd like to use as my theme the 1998 Academy Award acclaimed movie, *Saving Private Ryan*. Many of you may have seen it, even though most of you were probably still in kindergarten when it was released. It's essentially a war movie set around the D Day landing at Normandy in June 1944.

But I do not want to talk about war and violence here today, as that would be totally inappropriate. I do however, want to draw on a key aspect of the movie to make some points and pose some questions.

The movie opens with an old man shuffling into a military cemetery (we later find out it is the US Cemetery at Normandy in France) followed by his extended family: wife, children and grand-children.

He kneels by a white cross and starts to weep. The camera focuses on his teary eyes and we fade back in time to the landing on the Normandy beaches in 1944.

Following 30 minutes of graphic battle scenes at Omaha Beach, the movie shifts to the US, where a clerk is compiling condolence letters to immediate family members who have lost loved ones.

She becomes aware that three brothers have lost their lives in very recent World War II conflicts and the mother, Mrs Ryan, is about to receive three telegrams.

The clerk alerts her superiors and the Army discovers that there is one more son and he is part of the D Day operation. They decide to bring him home: to save him.

Captain John Miller (Tom Hanks) is asked to save Private James Ryan (Matt Damon) and with a squad of eight he sets off across France to do so.

Many escapades later, and with loss of life, they find Private Ryan but end up in a major battle in which Captain Miller is fatally wounded. His dying words to Private Ryan are, "earn this."

The final scene in the film reverts back to the cemetery in present time. The old man, the 80 or so year old Private Ryan, wearily stands up from the white cross (which we later see bears Captain John Miller's name) and emotionally asks two things of his wife: "Tell me I've led a good life; tell me I'm a good man."

Now don't worry, I'm not going to ask you to imagine you are an eighty year old reflecting on your life. Heaven forbid, I'm betting most of you can't even imagine what life is going to be like in six months, let alone in more than fifty years.

However, I do want to dwell for a bit on what it means to earn something, what comprises a good life and what makes a good person.

All of you have worked hard to gain your degree. Naturally, some have worked harder than others and some have had to overcome considerable hardships on their road to graduation.

But all of you are privileged to have been able to attend this prestigious University. The vast majority of you would not have been able to do what you have done in at least 50 per cent of other countries in the world.

I ask you therefore, to not only appreciate your good fortune but to earn it. And in Private Ryan's mind, you do so by leading a good life and being a good person.

Of course, leading a good life implies there is a bad life alternative, just as being good implies that the alternative is being bad. I do not want to dwell on the negative; that is, the "bad" alternative. But I do want to make one point.

In the recent debate over the misuse of parliamentary expenditure allowances and the subsequent rush to write new rules and regulations, I read a comment in The Age newspaper: 'If politicians need rules to determine what is right and what is wrong, they do not deserve to be in parliament.'

I extend this thinking to you graduates: as highly educated people, if you cannot discern between right and wrong, then our country is in peril. You will know what a bad life looks like and equally you will know what it means to be bad.

Instead I want to focus on the positives: a good life and being good.

Of course, there are degrees of good and being good may mean different things to different people. However, there are some universal goods that underpin good lives.

I certainly do not want this to sound like a sermon but all the great religions of the world identify with unquestionable goods such as compassion, tolerance and understanding. These universal goods are underpinned by the willingness to walk around in someone else's shoes: to be empathic.

If you go through life showing empathy to others, you will undoubtedly lead a good life and be a good person. At times this will not be easy and self-interest will tempt you.

One tip from me here is to always ask yourself this question: do the ends always justify the means? In my experience they very frequently do not and I have observed that once a dubious line is crossed (i.e. self-interest ends justifying questionable means), then the flood gates open and you continue to operate on the wrong side of the line.

This inevitably leads to a loss of integrity and once this occurs it is extremely hard to mend the damage. I could give numerous examples of this and I'm sure most of you could do the same.

In closing, I'd like to share with you my priorities in employing people, as all of you, even if you are currently employed, will be applying for jobs in the future.

I look for three things in prospective employees: character, work ethic and ability. Importantly, I rate them in that order.

To me, a person's character is by far the most important. What values underpin that character? How is the person going to get on with others? Will they relate to fellow workers and external stakeholders? Will they be honest, trustworthy and loyal? And will I enjoy working alongside them?

So, be ready for interview questions such as, "what is important to you in life?" and "what personal values do you hold most dearly?" Be prepared to talk about big picture aspirations for both you and society in general.

My second highest priority is work ethic and I expect a prospective employee to demonstrate to me at interview that they are prepared to work hard.

Obviously, you will have worked hard to gain your degree, but can you give any other evidence of hard working commitment, such as involvement in a club, society, musical group or charity.

A cliché I like is 'hats off to the past, coats off to the future'. That is, if I employ you, will you be prepared to take off your jacket, roll up your sleeves and put in a solid effort?

And lastly, I look for ability. However, this is pretty much a given as you have obtained a University degree and are therefore clearly able.

Interestingly, much of what you have learned at university will not be applicable in the job you attain and employers will expect you to learn new skills.

And this is the point: ability can be acquired but character and work ethic are pretty much already set in stone.

I thank you for being so attentive and for allowing me to slip into the odd cliché.

I congratulate you again and wish you all the very best in your future lives.

As I look out on this wonderful portrait of a multicultural educated Australia, I realise that our nation is in very capable hands.

Thank you.