

Speech by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan

President, National University of Singapore

Commencement Dinner, 15 July 2011 at 7 pm, University Cultural Centre

NUS Chancellor, President S R Nathan

NUS Pro-Chancellors, Mr Ngiam Tong Dow and Mrs Ngiam, Dr Cheong Siew Keong

Chairman, NUS Board of Trustees, Mr Wong Ngit Liong and Mrs Wong

Members of the NUS Board of Trustees

Graduands, Alumni and Friends

Ladies and Gentlemen

I always enjoy Commencement because it has so many fascinating dimensions.

At the centre are our happy graduands, their proud parents and families.

There is the pomp of ceremony; the warmth of friendships made more precious by a sense of a happy chapter closing; and the ritual of taking photos by the sculpture outside the University Cultural Centre; the one which reads "I WAS HERE".



Personally, what I like most is to observe each of the graduands as they come up to receive their scrolls - the play of emotions on their faces and their underlying personalities. This year, I noticed that many of the SOC and SDE men sported retro- big black spectacles, for that trendy-studious look. The Business School graduates of course were professional in their clean-cut glasses; while many from FASS favoured a multi-coloured approach.

There were also some charming little surprises.

At the Commencement ceremony on Tuesday, a vivacious graduand after receiving her scroll, held on to my hand and asked "Do you mind if I do a stunt?"

Before I could reply, this is what happened: she held my arm up and did a neat little pirouette.

As she left the stage, she smiled and explained "It was on a dare!"

I felt a bit disappointed as I thought she had done it because I looked like a good dancer, but in any case, I hope she won herself a nice dinner.

Like our students, our NUS Community has its own unique personality and distinctive character. I reflected on some of the aspects of the NUS personality which I particularly like.

I like the NUS personality because we are always trying out new things which also highlight refreshing, sometimes surprising, facets of our community.

This year, I was very pleasantly surprised to see the special video which the Faculty of Engineering created for Commencement. It starts with Prof Seah Kar Heng playing the piano accompanied by Prof Lim Seh Chun on the flute.

As they played "Danny Boy" harmoniously together, the subtitle appeared: "Engineering is COORDINATION, PRECISION"

Then, there was a group of students with a robot that walked across the screen with a flag congratulating the Class of 2011. The subtitle: "Engineering is SYNERGY, COMMITMENT"

Then Engineering Alumna and SEA Games Gold Medallist Tao Yijun performing *wushu* gracefully under a spreading tree. The subtext: “Engineering is DISCIPLINE, ENERGY”.

I must say I never quite appreciated this very artistic side of our Engineering School – well-done Engineers ! We will never look on you in the same way again!

Another facet of the NUS personality that I really like, is our fierce commitment to excellence.

Last Sunday, both our men’s and women’s Dragon-boat teams did NUS proud by winning the Prime Minister’s Challenge trophy.



We were all ecstatic with this wonderful achievement.

But, it was something quite different which really impressed me.

This year, our men’s team was unusual because half of the team were dragon-boaters while the other half were canoeists. I was told they have very different cultures, and we had taken a bit of a risk by making up the team this way.

We did not have a good start on Sunday afternoon as our men's team did not do very well in an earlier race. I could see the disappointment clearly written on their faces.

Yet, when it came to the main event, the race for the Prime Minister's Challenge trophy, our men's team powered ahead to a convincing victory.

I was really delighted by this. But I was even more impressed by something that happened after the wild jubilation of the prize-giving. The team had sat down on the grass bank in a post-victory reflective mood and the team-leaders took turns to speak to the group.

I was particularly struck by what the captain, Charles Chan said.

He said: "I am glad we were able to put aside our egos. We did so because we wanted to do our best for our School. The last stretch – it was not clear how it would turn out. But I could feel it, I could feel each and everyone of you straining to give everything you had. We won because we wanted it more than anyone else. What is important is that after this race, we keep this spirit – no matter which boats we row in the future, we must keep this spirit of giving it our all".

To do our best for our School. To keep this spirit of giving it our all.

Those words spoken from the heart, captured for me, an essential core of the NUS personality – a fierce determination to excel, to give it our all.

As we advance as a university, we will win many races, and we will also lose a few.

But what will keep us on our steep trajectory of achievement, is our unwavering commitment to excellence, to doing our very best.

Fortunately for us, this impulse is deeply entrenched, // it's part of our DNA.

I say this with some conviction, because there are striking examples from our history, which indicate that this is so.

Recently, I was reading the remarkable story of one of our alumni. He had a very difficult childhood and could not complete his normal schooling. During the war, he had to overcome incredible adversity in order to make ends meet.

Yet, he not only survived, but somehow, he managed to work his way up to being admitted for studies in the University of Malaya at Singapore.

I felt he managed to do so because in whatever situation he found himself, and some of these were really strange ones, he would really apply himself – he would do his very best. From what I read, it seemed to me that he also possessed some critical qualities – integrity, a great ability to connect and get along with others, and a high degree of selflessness and true humility.

These qualities enabled him to move up quickly, after his graduation, into a series of ever-higher and important posts which he discharged with great distinction.

Most of us actually know this alumnus, because the person I speak of is President SR Nathan, the Chancellor of our University.



Photo Credit: Hester Tan, Channelnewsasia

President Nathan is a great man who has accomplished such a great deal in so many areas. But for the NUS community, it is his genuine interest and deep engagement with NUS that we are most grateful for and cherish the most.

As Chancellor of NUS since 1999, President Nathan has extended his strong support to so many University programmes and student activities. He has gone far far beyond what might be considered the official duties of the Chancellor. He has visited many of our departments, spoken to large numbers of our student groups and faculty, hosted countless lunches and dinners at the Istana, and also graciously helped our fund-raising efforts.

For example, during our Annual Giving drive in 2005, President Nathan wrote a personal letter to fellow alumni, which resulted in gifts of about \$1 million to assist needy students.

As we all know, this will be the last time that President Nathan will grace our Commencement and this dinner as our Chancellor. On behalf of the entire NUS community, I would like to express our deepest appreciation to President.

On so many occasions, we have been touched and moved by your passion, deep interest and concern for the NUS community and what we are striving for.

We will certainly miss your support and presence as Chancellor. But we hope that you will continue to grace our events, and to enrich our university community as our distinguished alumnus.

THANK YOU PRESIDENT NATHAN!

During this commencement period, we are reminded that above all, President Nathan stands as a true beacon and compass for our young graduates.

To the Class of 2011, I hope you will be inspired by President Nathan's example to contribute, to do good, and to serve society well.

We wish you every success in your chosen paths,

As our newest graduates, you will continue and extend the value which our University brings to society.

As our newest alumni, I hope you will continue to contribute to the NUS community, help us develop an even more dynamic and interesting personality.

I would like to end with an email I received from Diane Fletcher who heads our legal office.

It wasn't about some legal fine-print.

What she wrote was this:

"I always enjoy Commencement; it gives me a recharge for our mission."

I hope that for all of us, particularly for our graduands, Commencement has given us the same lift – given us a recharge for our mission.

Thank you very much and please have an enjoyable evening!