

**NUS President Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
NUS Commencement 2010
University Cultural Centre, 5 July, 2010**

CURIOSITY, PASSION AND COMMUNITY

NUS Chancellor, President S R Nathan
Chief Justice Mr Chan Sek Keong and Mrs Chan
Minister for Education, Dr Ng Eng Hen
His Excellency U Win Mynt, Dean of Diplomatic Corps
NUS Pro-Chancellors Mr Ngiam Tong Dow and Dr Cheong Siew Keong
Chairman, NUS Board of Trustees, Mr Wong Ngit Liong
Members of the NUS Board of Trustees
Distinguished Guests
Graduands, Parents and Families
Alumni and Friends
Ladies and Gentlemen

Today we celebrate our University's 98th Commencement or Convocation as it was previously known.

The first was in 1910, when seven students graduated from the Straits and Federated Malay States Government Medical School, from which NUS traces its roots. Since then, more than 200,000 talented women and men have passed through the portals of our predecessor institutions - the King Edward VII College of Medicine, Raffles College, University of Malaya, University of Singapore - and the National University of Singapore. Our alumni have chosen different paths in their lives, and achieved success and contributed to our country and society in diverse ways.

So, for the graduating class of 2010, as we celebrate your achievements today, we also welcome you as a vital part of this rich history and tradition, which you will refresh and extend.

At last year's Commencement, I spoke about the attitudes and qualities that have typified our graduates over the past century. This year, I have looked once again to our past, for enduring advice that may be of value to you. I offer three for you to ponder:

Stay Curious

The first is: Stay curious.

If I had to name one person whom I have worked with, who scores "10-out-of-10" for curiosity, that person would be Mr Philip Yeo, Special Advisor for Economic Development in the Prime Minister's Office and the Chairman of SPRING Singapore.



**Photo © Mr Yeo, reproduced with kind permission.*

Philip's curiosity and zest for learning know no bounds. His interests range widely, from the highly technical like molecular biology, to the deeply cultural such as ancient Persian epics. He is helped by the fact that he reads faster than most humans on earth, and he sleeps less than anyone I know.

Philip completed a Master of Science in Systems Engineering, in our University in 1974. In his usual style, he described his course in the following way:

"A lot of my time was spent in the computer centre In those days, the computers were like a church. The priests were the operators. You gave the punch cards to the computer operators and you waited for the printout, sometimes until midnight. It was hard work [but] the course kept my brain alive so that when I went to Harvard Business School ... my mental processes were still alive and good."

The last part of his quote is clearly an understatement, since Philip went on to make many outstanding contributions to Singapore and around the world. I am convinced though that his great curiosity and hunger to learn is a key part of his effectiveness as a leader.

What Philip Yeo and others in our history teach us is this: **STAY CURIOUS.**

Curiosity is crucial for life-long learning, which in turn, is essential for us to keep pace with the rapid changes in knowledge and technology. Curiosity is also the motive force for deeper and broader learning; this will expand the vistas of our personal lives, and help us find fresh ways to make a positive impact.

Pursue Your Passion

The second is: Pursue your passion.

This is a much-used theme for Commencement speeches. Yet, it is true that most of us are more likely to succeed and to make a difference, if the goals and paths we

pursue hold a deep and real significance for us. The key problem though is that you can only really tell if you are pursuing your passion when you look back. It is often not easy to discern this at the start.

But to our young graduates today, I would make this point. This inherent uncertainty at the start should not deter you from pursuing something which you feel carries special meaning for you.

A striking exemplar of this is our alumna Dr Noeleen Heyzer. Noeleen graduated from our University with a Bachelor and Master of Social Sciences in 1971 and 1973 respectively. She went on to complete her PhD at Cambridge University.



**Photo of Dr Heyzer © ESCAP, reproduced with kind permission.*

Noeleen wanted to contribute to society, to “make the world a better place”, and to enhance the recognition of the role of women in economic development and in society. Overcoming many challenges, she started on a path that eventually led her to become the Executive Director for the United Nations Development Fund for Women or UNIFEM.

She worked hard, and with success, to bring women’s issues high on the UN’s agenda. Today, in addition to being the Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations, she also serves as the first woman to be appointed as Executive Secretary of the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

Noeleen’s story speaks powerfully to us about what can be achieved if you PURSUE YOUR PASSION.

Value Our Community

The third is: Value our community.

Our University is privileged, during this ceremony, to confer an Honorary Doctorate on Chief Justice Mr Chan Sek Keong. A man of many talents and outstanding qualities, his sterling accomplishments will be presented by our Public Orator shortly.

However, I would highlight here a particular quality of Chief Justice Chan that stands out. This is his deep empathy and concern for the community.

Chief Justice Chan firmly believes that a good judge must understand the culture and contexts of the communities that make up our multi-racial society. As he has shown through his work, it is by valuing our society that we can really serve it well.

This finds resonance in a totally different way, in a uniquely NUS tradition – our annual Rag & Flag.



For many students, their fondest memories are of the many late nights spent building floats, often in great secrecy; the endless practices for float performances; and the jubilation or tears when the results of the float competitions are announced.

Despite the centrality of this annual ritual, many are probably unaware of its history. The origins of Rag & Flag can be traced back to 1958. Our senior alumnus, Mr Donald Wyatt sent me a copy of the November 1957 Malayan Undergrad, the student union's newsletter.

The article announced the launch of the University's Welfare Week as follows:

"Welfare Week, a part of the Union's 'Be With the People' policy ...is designed to create a civic sense in the students and impress upon the people of Malaya and Singapore that the Varsity students have a definite interest in the well-being of their people"

Hence, the tradition of Rag and Flag is rooted in the notion of service and relevance to the community and to society. I am glad that this intent has been kept alive over the past half-century. In the last four years, our students raised more than \$1.5 million for various charities. Rag and Flag has also kept alive a tradition of student creativity and social awareness.



Source: *Malayan Undergrad*.

This slide shows a photo of one of the earliest floats from the King Edward VII Hall. It shows a large mushroom cloud rising from the back of the lorry, with two students dressed as monkeys on top.

I was told that the theme was inspired by the “Ban the Bomb” movement which followed after the testing of the hydrogen bomb in 1952. But, I couldn’t quite reconcile this with the banner on the float which read: “Shall we start again, dear?”

Beyond promoting student creativity and raising funds, however, we should always keep in mind, the larger ideal which drives Rag and Flag, which is: **VALUE OUR COMMUNITY.**

If we value our community, we will take an active interest in it, and will contribute through ideas and action, to the advancement of the peoples that make up the community. This giving back to the community has been a defining feature of our University over the past century, and we look to you to extend and to build further on this lofty tradition. By valuing our community, we also become an integral part of it, drawing a strong sense of belonging, pride and identity.

This year, the NUS Students Union will be organising our grandest Rag day ever.

Rag 2010 will be held in conjunction with the Olympic Flame Arrival Celebrations, which kick-starts the inaugural Youth Olympic Games in Singapore. The Olympic flame will make its way from the peaks of Mount Olympia, stopping at Berlin, Dakar, Mexico City, Auckland, Seoul, and finally reaching the NUS Kent Ridge Campus in Singapore.

I very much hope that you will join us for this once-in-a-lifetime Rag celebrations, or for some of the many activities that fill the NUS campus calendar. For today does not mark the end of your association with our University, but the Commencement of a new phase as our valued alumni.

I believe you will find this engagement rewarding and fulfilling. The NUS community is always **YOUNG**, refreshed by the constant infusion of talent, youthful idealism and

creative energy. The NUS community is always at the cutting edge – a place where new ideas and thinking are debated, tested and defined. I invite you to remain as an integral part of this community – you can add to its richness, and in turn, it can continue to enrich your lives.

So – to the Class of 2010 – my heartiest congratulations to you and your loved ones. I wish you every success for the future!

STAY CURIOUS,
PURSUE YOUR PASSION, and
VALUE OUR COMMUNITY!

Thank you.

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