

**SPEECH BY NUS PRESIDENT, PROF TAN CHORH CHUAN  
AT THE MAIN COMMENCEMENT CEREMONY  
8 JULY 2013**

**CHANGE, PERMANENCE, AND CONTINUITY**

NUS Chancellor, President Tony Tan Keng Yam

Minister for Education, Mr Heng Swee Keat

NUS Pro-Chancellors

NUS Chairman and Trustees

Distinguished Guests

Graduates, Parents and Families

Alumni and Friends

Ladies and Gentleman

To the graduating class of 2013, my colleagues and I extend our heartiest congratulations! We are truly proud of you and what you have achieved, and we join your parents and loved ones in celebrating this special occasion with you.

It must have seemed just a short time ago, when you first entered NUS. For many of you, university life must have been a big change from what you had been used to before. In fact, you yourself may have changed a great deal over the course of the past few years. Now, as you graduate and enter the world of work, you will encounter many more and possibly profound changes. Indeed, change is a constant feature of our lives and our world, coming faster and in more unexpected ways than ever before.

As the Greek philosopher Heraclitus said “No man ever steps in the same river twice; for it is not the same river and he is not the same man”.

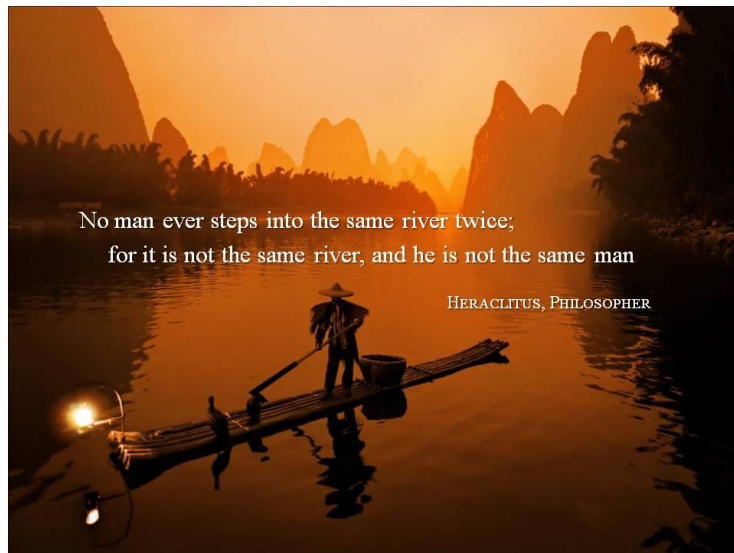


Image source: [Trey Ratcliff, Stuck in Customs](#)

While change is often exhilarating, particularly when you are young, it can, at times, be difficult and disorientating. So, as individuals and as a community, how then can we better embrace rapid and profound change and yet not be overwhelmed by it?

I would like to offer three suggestions.

### **Value your friends**

The first is “value your friends”.



Image source: Justin Daniel Pereira (USP '13)

I am sure that many of your best memories of university were those spent with your friends, in both good times and bad. Yet, as you embark on your careers, it is very easy for these friendships to slip away, displaced by more pressing priorities. I would urge you though, to keep in touch with your friends. They will be a major source of support and encouragement, especially when things are not going well. Your friends will also become a useful network of contacts for work, even for life.

A few years from now, and above all I have mentioned, your university friends will provide you a vital link with the past, a valuable point of reference that is helpful in coping with rapid change. For example, when you become wildly successful, as some of you no doubt will, it is good to have friends who had known you in simpler times, and who can be trusted to be candid and help keep your feet planted firmly on the ground.

### **Develop a sense of purpose**

My second suggestion is to develop a strong sense of purpose, regardless of what you are pursuing.

This year, NUS was deeply honoured that former Prime Minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew accepted the honorary Doctor of Laws from our university. Mr Lee's unique and remarkable achievements are well-known and widely recognised. He transformed Singapore from Third World to First, and is highly respected as a deep thinker, international statesman and global visionary.

Mr Lee received a scholarship to read English, Economics and Mathematics in Raffles College, one of NUS' predecessor institutions. His education at Raffles College was interrupted by the Japanese occupation during the Second World War. Thereafter, Mr Lee continued his education at Cambridge University and obtained a rare double first, in Law. He returned to practice law in Singapore, but his passion was in politics and the welfare of the people. The rest, we know, is Singapore's modern history.



Much has been said about Mr Lee, his remarkable qualities and lasting contributions. I would highlight here, his strong sense of purpose. Indeed, Mr Lee devoted his entire life in service of our country. I believe it was this deep sense of purpose that underpinned his strong leadership which brought Singapore successfully through a series of wrenching changes and defining transformations.

Mr Lee is a very rare talent. Yet, the qualities and values he exemplifies, and in particular, his deep sense of purpose, these serve as a powerful beacon not just for all of us in NUS, but for the broader community in Singapore and beyond.

On this Commencement Day, I am reminded that this is what contributes to the permanence of our university in the face of rapid change. Our deep tradition of service, and the qualities and values we espouse have remained unchanged despite the dramatic transformations that our university and our society have experienced over the course of more than a hundred years.

### **Value our community**

This brings me to my third suggestion which is “value our community”. We all have different interests and each of us belongs to several overlapping sub-communities, within the broader NUS and Singapore community.

For example, the University Scholars Programme is a closely-knit multidisciplinary community which has been further strengthened with the introduction of residential college living and learning in 2011. It is also very heartening that USP students have had a chance to reflect on, and taken steps to engage with, society's issues in the course of the programme. Noteworthy USP projects ranging from the Sustainable Living Lab to the Interfaith Dialogue with Mr Tony Blair, deal with multifold issues and causes.



In important ways, such communities and the broader Singapore community we belong to, help shape our identity and give context and meaning to our work and lives. I hope that you will, in turn, value our community and actively contribute to its evolution, richness and progress.



Now that you have become alumni of NUS, I very much hope that you will continue to maintain strong ties and remain a vital part of the NUS community. As students, you have contributed greatly to the vibrancy and success of our university, and I look forward to your doing the same as our alumni.

### **Change, permanence and continuity**

In closing, I wish you the very best as you step into a world full of complexity, change and volatility. There will be challenges but there will also be many rich opportunities.

As you embark on your new journey, I hope you will value your friends, develop a strong sense of purpose in what you choose to pursue, and continue to contribute to our community.

Even in the face of disconcerting change, I believe these will provide a powerful ballast which will help you succeed, and give even greater meaning and fulfilment in your work and lives.

Congratulations once again and I wish you every success for the future!

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