

Commencement Address
NUS President Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
7 Jul 2014, University Cultural Centre

On Being Happy

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 Gentlemen

One of the things I look forward to greatly each year is the privilege of being the first person to formally congratulate our graduating students at Commencement.

So to the Class of 2014, well done and my heartiest congratulations! The entire NUS community also joins me in expressing our warmest congratulations to your families and loved ones, whose pride, joy and excitement we share.

When I was preparing for today's speech, helpful colleagues took turns to propose possible themes and subjects.

The first suggestion I received was very topical. The 2014 Football World Cup and the lessons it holds for fresh graduates. This was quite tempting but I decided to give it a miss because my inadequate knowledge of the competition might have led me to score some own goals.

At the other end of the spectrum, was a suggestion that I should talk about the increasing complexity of our globalised world, job polarisation and how graduates could best navigate these.

I decided not to take this up either because I trust that your talent and years of preparation at NUS would equip you well for the opportunities and challenges, the “ups and downs” that you will encounter in the next chapter of your lives.

So this morning, I am going to talk about something different – I want to speak about being happy.

An article I read recently, noted that human beings pay more attention to negative information and events than to positive ones. My colleagues in Psychology explained that this is probably an evolutionary adaptation since it is more urgent to avoid immediate danger than to respond to positive developments. They stressed though that it does not mean that our species is programmed to be sad.

Nevertheless, I think the observation should alert us to not forget to be happy when we achieve something we feel is meaningful, and to consider how we could sustain a state of well-being and fulfilment.

For the Class of 2014, you certainly have a great deal to be happy about. You have worked very hard, made sacrifices and arrived successfully at this important milestone in your lives. While in university, it is likely that you made many friends, and received strong support from your families and mentors – people who care deeply about your growth and development.

As you start work, it is easy for such friendships to slip. I hope though that you will make the time and effort to continue nurturing and building on these relationships. This is because your family and friends will remain a major source of happiness and fulfilment, as well as of resilience and strength when things are not going well.

Beyond this, some of the most satisfying experiences are associated with giving to others. Many among our NUS family have gained much by contributing to our society.

A great example is Mr Denis Tan, who is graduating top of his class with a double degree in Chemical Engineering and Economics. Denis has been very active in many social service initiatives. Through NUSSU, he led the effort to help needy fellow students with bursaries; in Tembusu College, he promoted sustainable community and youth development programmes; and he also served as a volunteer mentor to low-income primary school children.



Denis Tan (second from left)



Denis Tan '13

Double degree in
Chemical Engineering & Economics

Commencement
TWENTY.FOURTEEN

Other NUS students have sought to bring good cheer to the community in quite different ways. The NUS Lorong Boys, five students from our Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, have given many public performances including four on an MRT. Their wish is to bring the joys of classical music to a much broader audience. In fact, I heard the Lorong Boys play last month. They were terrific and must have come from a very sophisticated Lorong.



Lorong Boys YSTCM

Rit Xu (Flute)
Loke Kai-Yuan David (Violin)
Lee Ge Biao Gabriel (Violin)
Jonathan Shin Zi Yang (Piano)
Joachim Theodore Lim (Percussion)



Commencement
TWENTY.FOURTEEN

A strong sense of fulfilment can also come from having a deep and genuine interest in your work. Many of us are familiar with this quote attributed to Confucius: “Choose a job you love, and you will never have to work a day in your life”.

In practice, some of you already know what you would love to do and are lucky enough to get into that line of work. Others may be less certain or may not have landed what they think would be their ideal first job. Under such circumstances, I believe that work will be as interesting or as boring as you yourself make it to be.

When I was a graduate research student, my experiments had a huge number of repetitive steps. I initially found this quite tedious. After all, I was training to be a clinician-scientist and here I was working more like a human reagent mixer and dispenser. But what my mentors taught me was that mastery of research techniques was necessary to open the doors to their creative improvement and to novel applications. This “tedious” discipline was in fact vital for long-term success in the lab.

When you start on your first job or your further studies, some parts of your work may appear at first, to be rather boring. I believe that resourcefulness and a positive attitude will help you greatly in such situations. Developing a real interest in your work will not only help you to do well in it, but can also be a source of great satisfaction while allowing you to learn many useful skills for the future.

Outside of work, we must not lose the ability to enjoy the small, charming things in life. Last week, my wife was jogging along a trail in Bukit Timah which had some durian trees which at this time of the year, were heavy with fruit. She came across three middle-aged men who had just picked up some durians and asked them if they were good. They replied that some of the durians were nice, others were awful but it was all “hao wan” (好玩) or “good fun”.

A timely reminder that sometimes, the simple pleasures in life are the best ones.

This is a good juncture for me to touch briefly on the subject of dissatisfaction. It is not difficult to be dissatisfied. In fact, there are some who seem to specialise in it. There are clearly many things that we could point to which are not up to our expectations, and could be improved. The real challenge, however, is how to convert dissatisfaction into concrete ideas and action for positive change. This is not easy. But if we can do so, we can contribute to making things better, whether it be at our work, or in the wider community.

We might also succeed in converting potentially negative emotional energies into positive ones of belief and optimism for the future, a strong sense that each of us, as individuals, can make a worthwhile contribution.

I believe that such optimism is well-founded. Throughout our university's history, since its founding in 1905, it has nurtured many young men and women who could have gone on to contribute in many different ways to Singapore, under much more daunting and challenging circumstances than the present time.

Today, Singapore is a leading global city providing a myriad of opportunities for well-prepared young people with commitment and the right attitudes. Our graduating students can therefore look with optimism to our community's further growth and development, and the part that you can play in it.

Finally, 2014 marks the 85th anniversary of the Faculty of Science and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; as well as the 10th Anniversary of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy. For our graduating students from these Faculties, this is therefore a doubly special occasion. To you and your Faculties, my heartiest congratulations!



To the entire Class of 2014, I warmly welcome you as our university's newest alumni. You are valued members of the NUS community, and part of the rich fabric of our history and shared experiences. Your voices, talent and actions, will help shape the future not just for yourselves but for all of us.

I wish you all the very best as you move on to the next phase of the journey of your lives. Once again, my heartiest congratulations!

All images © National University of Singapore or reproduced with the permission of its owners