

Speech by NUS President, Professor Tan Chorh Chuan, at Commencement Dinner, 15 July 2016

Mr Ong Ye Kung, Acting Minister for Education (Higher Education and Skills),
and Mrs Ong

NUS Pro-Chancellors, NUS Chairman and Trustees

Graduates, alumni, colleagues and friends

Just the other day, my wife Evelyn and I were joking about how trekking crews in
different parts of the world “treated” us at the end of a difficult day’s walk.

In Huangshan in China, when we finished a very long canyon walk, we were offered
foot reflexology and leg massages (for a fee).



Huangshan, China
Image source [Wikipedia](#)

In Tapovan in India, after a long hard slog up onto the glacier where we froze in the intense cold, our crew rewarded us by cooking some extra chapattis. It was a vegetarian trek, so the menu was either chapattis with potato curry, or potato curry with chapattis.



Tapovan, India

Photo source: Personal collection of Professor Tan Chorh Chuan

In Mongolia, the camel crew which doubled up as our guides, would wait dourly for us to arrive at the campsite. We suspect they just couldn't understand why 2 apparently healthy adults could walk so slowly.



Photo source: Personal collection of Professor Tan Chorh Chuan

Then two years ago, at the end of an exhausting 12-hour hike up to the top of Ras Daschen, the highest mountain in Ethiopia, when we got back to camp, the entire crew broke out in celebratory dance. Actually, I was dead tired and the bouquet of wild flowers they had kindly presented me triggered an attack of hay fever. What I wanted most, if it were possible, was to sit down on a rock and have a cold beer. But their enthusiastic delight at our completing the ascent was so genuine and so infectious, that we spent the next 15 minutes bobbing up and down, to the chant of Ethiopian songs.

The point I would like to make, is that we can learn a great deal from our Ethiopian trekking crew, about the virtues of zest and keeping a positive outlook to life.

Here in Singapore, we don't have to climb physical mountains every day, but many of us have to confront our own mental hills and mountains, and fend off the anxieties of living in a fast-changing world.

In the course of all this, it is quite easy for the world to look rather gloomy to us.

We read about computers beating the best human champions in chess, jeopardy and most recently, "go", and wonder what all this portends.

We could worry about how robots are doing more and more things, from financial advising to frying rice, and probably in the future, giving much better dinner speeches. Some of my friends had not quite recovered from the shock of Brexit, before they were hit by the news that France lost the (UEFA) European Championship.

Indeed, the world could look very gloomy if we allow ourselves to view it through gloom-tinted lenses.

In short, in our hyper-connected world, for those prone to worrying, there is no shortage of things to keep us happily worried.

So my main message to our graduates this evening as we mark the end of a truly memorable Commencement 2016, is this:

Be optimistic, keep your zest for life, and look at the world through positive action lenses.

A group of young NUS alumni from Engineering and Business exemplify this beautifully.

David Pong, Lim Chong Tee, Vincent Loka, and Pooi Ching Kwek were distressed by the plight of millions around the world without access to safe drinking water.

Their response? They invented a portable water filtration system. It is very light, uses a ceramic filter that does not need electricity, and can filter up to six to 10 litres of water per hour.

They then started a company called WaterROAM¹, and built larger scale models, which have been successfully used in disaster zones and remote rural villages.

Their vision? “A world where no man shall face prolonged thirst”.

Our young alumni were distressed by a very serious global problem. They used the knowledge and skills they gained in NUS, and created a solution which they are now deploying to help people around the world.

THAT, is the NUS SPIRIT!

Keeping your zest for life and being positive, can also lead you to contribute in quite different ways.

¹ <http://www.wateroam.com/our-story.html>

For example, during office hours, Professor Simon Chesterman is our Dean of Law, clearing tough administrative problems in a single bound, pushing complex academic programmes uphill – generally, doing the superhuman things we expect ALL our Deans to do every day, including Sundays and public holidays.

But in the quiet of the night, Simon is the novelist. In fact, he just launched his first novel about a plucky girl who solves complex puzzles, and explores the tension between nurture and nature. If Simon gives me a copy of his book, which he hasn't yet, I could tell you how beautifully written it is. I understand he was inspired to write by his children, and what they would want to read. I am glad he did so even though I think answering work emails is probably easier and more relaxing than writing a novel from scratch.

I am sure that among the talented NUS Class of 2016, there are many stories like these already, and many more to come in the future. On behalf of NUS, I congratulate you warmly on your achievements. May you find fulfilment in the areas you choose to pursue, excel and contribute. Above all, **be optimistic, positive, and keep your zest for life. THAT, is the NUS SPIRIT!**

Thank you and please have a great evening.