

NUS Commencement Dinner Speech 2013

NUS Chancellor, President Tony Tan Keng Yam, and Mrs Mary Tan

NUS Pro-Chancellors

NUS Chairman and Trustees

Distinguished Guests

Graduates, Alumni, Staff

Ladies and Gentlemen

As a young man, I was never very keen on ritual, but over time, I have come to appreciate its value. Rituals give a rhythm and significance to what we do; they serve like punctuation marks as we write the story of our lives, as individuals and as communities.

For our Class of 2013, I hope the Commencement ceremonies that have just ended, were for you and your families, like this: a giant “exclamation mark”!



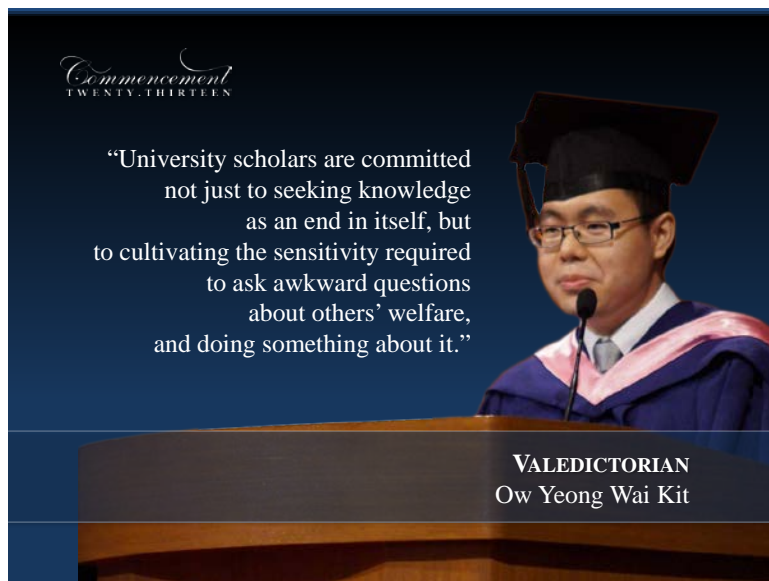
My heartiest congratulations once again!

For all of us, the past two weeks were a happy blur of handshakes and smiles, Commencement teddy bears and the occasional Presiding Officer hugged, the odd “high-five”, and of course, the traditional photos at the “I was here” sculpture. As for myself, I was amazed at the range of things that could be stored in the sleeves of the

graduation gowns and whipped out on stage – hand-phones, large cameras and even small teddy bears.



I also resonated with some of the points made by our guest speakers and Valedictorians. At the main Commencement Ceremony, the Valedictorian Ow Yeong Wai Kit spoke about having a sense of adventure, steadfastness and kindness in the University Scholars Programme.



He said: "... we in the USP do our best to remain committed to the cause of kindness and compassion. Many of us are devoted to social causes in Singapore. Such efforts

show that university scholars are committed not just to seeking knowledge as an end in itself, but to cultivating the sensitivity required to ask awkward questions about others' welfare, and doing something about it."

I found his references to "kindness and compassion" and to action, both refreshing and heartening. It reminds us that even as we nurture our students to be critical thinkers, even as we push the boundaries of research, and even as we reach further for excellence, we should remain a community which is vibrant, open and rigorous, yet marked by kindness and compassion; a community which we all value and one which reaches out positively to society at large.

At this year's NUS Open House in April, NUSSU mounted a photo exhibition of its LoveNUS 2013 initiative. This was a "commemorative activity for students, staff and alumni to display their collective affection and love for NUS". Students from each Faculty had put up photo-montages featuring their friends and special moments, reflecting for me, the warm and collegial dimensions of our university community.

The Faculty of Dentistry's panel was easy to identify because the poster had molars as a background and had photos of students brushing their teeth. Likewise, the School of Computing's display was readily spotted with its bright green label: "We code the future".



But I thought the most artily-done display was from the Faculty of Engineering. It featured an unusual shot of the school artistically framed by interesting objects in the foreground. It was nice to see the arty dimension of our Engineers - Well done Engineers!



As I reflect on what makes me value the NUS community so much, a few things stand out.

First, members of our community are passionate about their work and pursuits, and are always looking for ways to do things differently and better. This is most visible and obvious in the academic arena but it is also prevalent in our administrative departments. For Commencement for example, our colleagues in the Registrar's Office, Centre for Instructional Technology, and Office of Corporate Relations, together with our colleagues in the Faculties, are constantly adding new touches to make the ceremonies more interesting and enjoyable. They study practices from our past and from overseas, looking for fresh ideas to further enhance the celebratory aspects of the event.

It is crucial for us, as a community, to uphold and celebrate this culture of always striving to do better, and in this regard, please join me in applauding the great work done by the Commencement team.



Some members of the NUS Commencement Team

Secondly, I am heartened by the many acts and gestures of kindness and compassion on campus, which flow out into the wider community.

Apart from spontaneous acts of courtesy, there are also several broad-based initiatives on campus. Let me pick another example from NUSSU.

The Goodie Bag Movement was introduced earlier this year to encourage everyone at NUS to show kindness to others and to pass on that kindness. There are very clear instructions on the website explaining how it worked:

1. Collect the special goodie bag
2. Write a message of kindness or encouragement
3. Place some items that you want to give
4. Perform an act of kindness (*i.e. Hold the door/buy a drink for someone*) and pass the goodie bag to:
 - An unsung hero (*e.g. Bus driver, admin staff, tutors*)
 - Or, a random stranger who is hard at work (*i.e. A fellow buddy studying hard*)



Beyond kindness and compassion, there are also nice touches of lightness within the NUS community.

Take for example, Teng Yen Lin, more famously known as the NUS Ukulele girl. You may have seen her on Youtube, or in the Starhub advertisements aptly titled "Happy Everywhere". She has been singing on buses and the MRT, but one of her performances on an NUS shuttle bus really came off well and captured the imagination of the wider community through the YouTube video made of it.



Image source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=koRxe1wO4Gw>

It is easy for us, in the course of our busy lives, to feel weighed down by weighty issues, and it's nice to have touches of lightness that make our campus livelier and more spontaneous.

Finally, the NUS community is marked by a “can do” spirit which looks to the future with optimism and hope. This “can do” attitude has helped fuel our dynamism and excellent progress. It is a valuable part of our culture which we must constantly tend and build upon.

This year, NUS was privileged to confer an honorary Doctor of Laws upon Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Mr Lee's accomplishments are widely known and deeply admired in Singapore and around the world.

His legacy goes beyond his remarkable achievements of which we are all beneficiaries, to the personal qualities he embodies, which are also fundamental to our continued success as a community. These include:

- a deep sense of purpose,
- the courage and conviction to carve out our own paths,
- the unflagging drive to excel and self-surpass.



Image sources:

- 1) <http://mynicehome.sg/2012/11/04/sturdy-roots/>
- 2) http://www.todayonline.com/sites/default/files/styles/photo_gallery_image_lightbox/public/photos/43_images/lky_tree_planting.jpg

I would like to close by repeating the concluding line of my remarks about Mr Lee, at the Conferment ceremony:

“While always realistic about Singapore's limitations and vulnerabilities, his leadership was always marked by hope and a sense of collective purpose, qualities that have continued to the present day and which energise all of us to do even better for Singapore for the future.”

To the Class of 2013, as you become our newest alumni and move into the next phase of your lives, I hope you will carry with you the qualities so valued by our NUS community:

- A passion for your work and pursuits which make you strive to do things differently and better.
- Kindness and compassion for those around you and for the wider community.
- A “can do” spirit that looks to the future with optimism and hope.

Through these, I believe you will find personal fulfilment, while helping to lift the lives and spirits of those around you.

My heartiest congratulations once again, and my very best wishes for the future.

Thank you.