

Ela Gandhi- 2012 Spring Graduation Speech

Thank you for this honour.

Let this however not be an indication to all of you hardworking students who are waiting to graduate today that getting a PhD is always so easy.

People on the stage here will agree that it takes a lot of hard work unlike in my case.

Once a long time ago I too was a University student. I too felt the pressure of hard work at a University after flying through matric. The difficulty was to adjust to having to take responsibility for my own education and not rely on educators to consistently nag me until I got it right. So, we get used to having knowledge rammed into our heads in schools and then suddenly, we leave school behind and enter into a University where no one bothers whether you attend classes or not.

Here, we are left on our own. We have to work hard on our own, take our own initiatives to achieve that first degree or diploma.

In school, we get accustomed to being taught, to being given information and to being coached all the time before we write matric. Then we come to a University where you are expected to learn, to read, to find information and to absorb the information on your own. The change is usually like being thrown in the deep end of a swimming pool.

But can you imagine how good you feel when you actually are able to swim out of the deep end, in the same way today you feel good about yourselves because you have achieved what you set out to do.

But let me hasten to say you should not really feel too good. Why do I say that? Well, let me share with you my story? When I was at University, my lecturer told me that to get a BA degree is just the beginning because you are just an initiate, a “bachelor”. He said the word “bachelor” is derived from the French language and the term means a young man wishing to become a knight. So it means that you have climbed your first step of a series of steps but you have not arrived, you have not attained. Don’t sing and dance yet!

You may wish to boo me! But think about it and you will realise that it is absolutely important to acquire top skills and to excel in your field to be able to get a job, set up your own business or to be able to provide the skills to others.

As you look around, it becomes evident that things are changing rapidly. New technological developments, new knowledge production and new ways of looking at the world are replacing old ones every moment. As we learn and we have new experiences so we are able to expand our vision, become visionaries and produce our own knowledge. Learning never stops, whether in or out of University. This lesson I have never forgotten and so I feel all the time even now at my age which maybe more than three times your age, that there is a lot more that I would like to learn. I would like to know how things work and to be able to

produce some new knowledge myself. Of course I do realise that I do not have as many years left to do all this as you have, so I am telling you to become as enthusiastic about learning as I am, at least you have hope.

May I share a chapter from my own life? My father was an editor of a newspaper which was produced weekly. I recall that he spent most of his time gathering information and writing articles. Every article was written by hand, knowledge and information was gathered from reading books and getting news bulletins- there were no computers then.

But later we acquired a type writer which was not an electric type writer and so if you typed a wrong word there was nothing you could do about it. There was no delete button on that typewriter. So I had to learn how to work that system and develop it into a speedy efficient system. Then I grew up and we acquired an electric typewriter and I learnt to use that machine. Well let me tell you the typing was much neater as this new machine had a delete button. I typed all my assignments on this electric type writer.

Much later we acquired our first computer. That was daunting. For a while I was afraid to even touch it lest I destroy it. But when my children learnt to use it much quicker than I could, that did no good to my self image, so quietly I began to learn the basics and to figure out the intricacies of the computer with their help, of course. But guess what, now I did not only have a delete button but also had spell-check. I am telling you this story because you are on the threshold of your careers, you need to know that one; technology is growing, you have to work hard to keep abreast of it, and two; you have the magical opportunity to create your own technology. So what I am saying is that learning must not stop after you carry away that degree or diploma today. Learning goes on wherever you are whatever you are doing. You must continue to learn new things and that is what will lead you to all kinds of achievements.

Thirst, eagerness and a commitment for new knowledge is what we need to cultivate in order to be abreast of this new world. Just as we upgrade our telephones, computer programmes and so on, we have to upgrade ourselves all the time.

Finally, I would like to leave you with one very important lesson that I learnt very early in my life and that is that there are two very important attributes that we have to build into our lives in order to be really successful. What we mean by successful is another topic not for today but let me just say that success for me is certainly not about getting wealthy. These two attributes are humility and integrity. Humility helps me to acknowledge my mistakes and if I acknowledge them I can rectify them. It is always when we refuse to acknowledge our mistakes that we continue to live with them and eventually fail in life. Integrity helps me to cultivate the highest values in whatever I do. My smallest act will always be guided by the highest values. That then makes me proud of myself and I feel satisfied. Much more satisfied than having material things. A job well done is always satisfying and gives much more to our own self image than money can buy. You are happy because you have done the best you can, you are happy because in doing your best you have nothing to hide, you are happy because you know that your work is good and that makes you feel good about yourself. But most of all, you know what, your happiness changes the world around you because now you begin to

see a happier contented world, a new fresh world in which it is good to live. So it is possible for us to create that new world. You are now on the threshold of that new world.

Let me take this opportunity to congratulate you and to say that I hope that you will always remember integrity and humility are key to success!