

William L. Fisher

Commencement Remarks, Flinders University, On Occasion of Receipt of D.Sc. Honoris Causa

Thank you, Deputy Vice-Chancellor Day for presenting my citation.

Deputy Chancellor Hains, university officials, faculty, and especially graduates and family and friends. Congratulations to those graduating today from this great university.

First, I want to thank the Flinders University for conferring this distinct honor on me. It is one I appreciate and will certainly cherish.

Conventional wisdom says people in the position in which I am now are to offer sage advice, say things that pass for profound utterings, and pass along some eternal verities.

If I were 50 years or so younger, I might be able to do what conventional wisdom calls for. At that age, like a lot of you now, I was certain of many things and fairly sure I knew most of what I needed to know.

But I find as you go through life and life experiences of learning, you learn more, but you also come to appreciate just how much you do not know and even that some things may be unknowable.

So always, be aware and have some realization of things you do not know. What you know at any point in time is important. It will keep a whiff of modesty in your being. It will also keep you from making a fool of yourself.

A former Texas football coach, Darrell Royal, who was famous for winning games, liked to quote the Roman philosopher Seneca from a couple of millennia ago, who said that "luck is what happens when preparation meets opportunity."

This is certainly true, but a caveat is necessary. First, you have to figure out what the right preparation is, and you must know how to recognize opportunity when it comes to you, mostly in subtle ways. Trying to be ready and having a sense of timing are important.

I have come to believe that you take whatever talent and intelligence you have and with discipline and a willingness, if not determination, to expend a good amount of energy, you can accomplish some of the things you want, and maybe more, much more, than you ever expected or even had a right to expect.

I have seen colleagues with a modest amount of intelligence, but with energy, discipline, and the willingness to take a chance, do a lot and accomplish much. Perhaps that is where many of us are.

I have also known some exceptionally brilliant people lacking energy and drive, or being a perfectionist to a fault, fail to accomplish very much, if anything.

And through the years I have seen a few people combine brilliance, energy, discipline, and risk-taking proclivities. They are as impressive as they are rare. But they set a pace to which we can all aspire.

Whatever you are doing at any particular time, always keep in mind why you are doing it and why you think it is important. The literature is full of papers with lots of answers but no questions, nothing to justify the answers. Know the question first. Know what you are trying to solve and why it is worth being solved. It is a way to prioritize and get the most from your efforts.

Mental focus is important. You will find yourselves in situations where you are allotted, say, 30 minutes for a presentation. But the program runs long and you instead get 5 minutes, maybe only 1 minute. Be prepared to make it count.

Or imagine getting on an elevator and your company CEO or president is there and asks what you are doing. You may have a 20-second ride to make an impression, good or bad.

So, always have in mind a concise perception of what you are doing and why. It helps keep you focused and organized.

Always try to be self-confident, but not overly so. Gaining confidence in yourself may take a while. You may think at the beginning of a career that you are spinning your wheels, only to realize later that you accomplished quite a bit.

Whatever your next pursuit—going for an advanced degree or taking the one you are receiving here today and going into our challenging world, go for it. Have some fun along the way. And always hold close the ones you love.

Good luck, and enjoy.

Thank you.

Adelaide, April 17, 2015