



Graduation 2011

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Dame Joan Bakewell

Chancellor, Professor Warner, she of the honeyed words, members of the University, fellow graduands, parents and friends, I'm very conscious of the honour that you do me today and I thank you very warmly for it. It welcomes me to the heart of a proud and distinguished university and it makes me feel at one with its community of learning, which is what I believe a university to be. It has also given me a tremendous afternoon. What I want to tell those of you who are watching the screen, is that you weren't aware there was a procession of killer heels passing from right to left and making it. No broken ankles, well done.

Now then, throughout what is turning out to be quite a long life, I've perceived universities in very different ways, partly of course because my own outlook has changed, partly, indeed increasingly, because universities themselves are changing. As a school girl, growing up in Stockport during the war, a university was a very rare thing, no one in my family quite knew what it was, only one girl from my school had been to Oxbridge before and that was a grammar school. We just didn't know what was waiting for us. I regarded it the myth was that a university was an exotic hunting ground of the privileged, if sometimes naughty, upper classes. Haddon Byron after all kept a bear in the Quad at Trinity in Cambridge. And didn't Shelley set fire to his room? Or is that simply legend? Certainly we regarded anyone who went to university as highly privileged, very posh, probably rich and having nothing to do with our lives. Well, that's all changed, thank goodness.

In my teens, a university became for me a very real and difficult target to be reached by hard work and trying to ape what I thought I was expected to think. That was very difficult because I was brought up by a generation of women teachers in a girl's grammar school. I have to tell you that when women teachers left, or married in those days, they left their teaching jobs because of course they had taken upon themselves the job of a wife and mother, which was full time. And I was taught by a generation of women whose boyfriends and lovers, husbands, fiancés had died in the First World War. So my teachers held the jobs they did in my grammar school for something like 25, 30 and even 35 years. This makes for a very stable and predictable education but one that gets, dare I say it, rather stale. When I got to university, I didn't need to ape what people expected me to think, I was stunned to find that I was allowed to think for myself and to think virtually anything, it was almost impossible to dream up something that wasn't allowed, permitted and enjoyed. I was at Cambridge, the footlights was doing extremely extravagant political commentary, the union, women incidentally were not allowed either in the footlights or the union in those days, but the union was full of hot political debate. Of course university was a tremendous opportunity for my generation. Free of all student fees for the first time, we joined a community of knowledge; we regarded it as the crucible of the world's wisdom and of humanities sense of responsibility. After studying, it was only then it was up to the graduates to find, to find our own way in the world in terms of work and careers. We were at university to study for the love of learning and nothing more. At the time it was enough because when I emerged from university in the mid 50's, there were loads of jobs, places to live, no inflation, decent wages. I wish I could offer as much to you today. It was in that sense a golden time.

Today, the function of a university has, as we know, been amended to bring within its orbit, the whole range of vocational skills to equip graduates for the working life that lies ahead. In this shift of emphasis, I fear that some of the old values might be lost. The humanities, as we know, are particularly at risk. Yet they embrace concepts of human worth, moral judgement and social responsibility that nourish a balanced life and a stable and tolerant community. I ask you all to cherish them. It was recently reported that certain American states are dropping the requirement

from their school curriculum to teach cursive writing, joined up writing, is being abandoned in certain American state education systems. Joined up writing, do you remember when you could first do it and how wonderful it felt and how it all looked the same until you began to get some character into your writing and now every one of you has a joined up writing that reflects your different personalities. Rather like the shoes I might say. Cursive writing is the bedrock of what is taught in our schools but keyboards, smart phones are rendering it obsolete. We are literally losing joined up, I couldn't think of a better metaphor for what is happening to knowledge, we're losing the joined up. Each one of you, parents, friends and graduands, has the capacity to enjoy a myriad different sorts of knowledge. They come from a multitude of sources and mix and multiply in your brains. If there is one thing that I have learned, it is that all is connected, low knowledge is alone and useless and that the key to a rich and creative life is to allow all sorts of ideas, talents and inclination to find expression in what you do. Not only in your professional career and the job you're paid for but in the way you live your life, enjoy your family, your community and your friends. Specialise by all means as I can see that you have done with such success. I wish you success in all your careers. But nourish your mind and your identity with all that the world has to offer. As the next generation it belongs to you. I wish you all a great and creative future.