

“Cultivate an outlaw mind” – Alide Dasnois

[Text of the speech delivered at the UCT Faculty of Humanities graduation on 16 December 2014]

It is a great honour to be here today to talk to you, in the hall where I graduated so many years ago. My mother taught at this university for more than 30 years; my father, my brother and many of my friends graduated from here and one of my sons studied here, so I have a strong connection to UCT.

Thank you for inviting me.

Today is Reconciliation Day. Reconciliation Day is a bit of a nightmare for newspaper editors because, like Human Rights Day and Freedom Day and Youth Day and Women’s Day, it rolls around every year and every year we have to find something new to write in the editorial. I think many of us often ended up pulling out last year’s editorial and doing a bit of cutting and pasting and coming to the weighty conclusion that “we’ve come a long way but there’s still a long way to go”.

I won’t do that, but I do want to tell you a story which to me illustrates just how hard reconciliation still is, and what we can do about it.

At the *Cape Times*, like at all morning papers, we used to meet in the late afternoon – editors, layout sub-editors and the chief photographer – to map out the next day’s edition. The news editors would present the best stories of the day and the picture editor the best photos, and we would decide what to put on which page. At one of these meetings, the picture editor brought in photos of the forced removal of some families by the City of Cape Town’s strangely named “anti-land invasion unit”. One of the pictures showed sheets of corrugated iron from demolished shacks, with families sitting among their belongings on the sand, and on the skyline a scruffy dog.

We joked about how some readers would call the paper the next day offering to give the dog a home. And they did.

The point I am making is that those readers noticed only the dog, yet the families were there for all to see.

In South Africa, because of our history, it is probably harder than elsewhere to put aside our own blinkers and see things as they really are instead of as we expect to find them. It takes effort, and humility, to see the world as others see it. Yet that is what we have to do if we want to bring about justice, without which, of course, there can be no reconciliation.

Here at UCT you have been taught to observe and to think for yourself. It is an important lesson, and as you leave the university you have a choice about how to use it.

You can put your time at UCT behind you, and move on into what is quaintly called the “real” world, and settle down and fit in and make money and stop questioning the way things are. OR, you can take what you have learned here and use it in that insane world out there, you can go on asking questions as you did while you were here, you can look at the world with your own eyes and make up your own mind about it.

A small minority of people in the world have a university degree. In sub-Saharan Africa, according to UNESCO, only about 5% of people of university age go to university. And it seems to me that those of us who have been given this gift have a duty, a duty to be insubordinate. Not in our manners, of course, but in our thinking. We have a duty to observe carefully, to question what we are told and to decide for ourselves.

So as you head off to whatever you have planned to do next, I would like to invite you to take with you that independence of mind, that scepticism, that restless, demanding curiosity, that respect for the evidence and for the well-argued point of view of others which are the glories of an academic environment. Don't believe anyone who cannot convince you with argument. Be insubordinate. Cultivate an outlaw mind.

And don't be afraid to make mistakes. It's not as if previous generations are handing you a perfect world, one which you must carry carefully so you don't drop it and break it.

It is a messy world full of injustice and disaster and old, rotting certainties. A world where bankers earn much more than presidents, where women fight for a job cleaning other people's toilets, where adult men earn a living waving a giant yellow sponge hand to point motorists to a townhouse development they will never themselves be able to afford, where somewhere in the Pacific there is a sea of floating plastic rubbish so big it takes more than a day for an ocean-going liner to sail across it. I'm sure you can do better than that.

Congratulations to you all, and good luck.