

**Address by outgoing registrar Hugh Amoore to the graduation congregation
19 December 2015, 18h00, Jameson Hall**

Vice-chancellor, students, supporters and colleagues,

First, thank you, vice-chancellor, for the honour you have done me in inviting me to address this congregation.

It is but one of, and perhaps the culminations of, the opportunities that this university has given me. One of those opportunities was, with the late John Reid¹, to compose the dedication read on our behalf at the start of this ceremony by a member of the SRC.

So, it seemed to me opportune to revisit it this evening.

The dedication proclaims this as a time for celebration.

And, yes, it is.

And thus my first privilege is to congratulate you, this evening's graduands, and your families and friends, and to join with you as you celebrate this rite of passage.

The dedication calls on us to “re-affirm our mission to nurture free enquiry” and “to do so in a spirit of freedom and responsibility”.

This, it seems to me, is non-negotiable if we are to remain a university.

This morning's honorary graduate spoke of the educated mind and the characteristic of the educated mind, which is to be prepared to change his/her/their mind on the basis of reasoned argument. I think that says something important about a university

This evening is a celebration for three faculties including the humanities, and I believe that the role of the humanities is central in any university. Why do I say this? One of my teachers² in what was then the arts faculty has recently put it better than I could. He writes of the need for “a critically literate citizenry, as indispensable to a democratic society, competent to explore and interrogate the assumptions behind the paradigms of national and economic life reigning at any given moment” and that “in the end you have to make a stand. You will have to say: we need free enquiry because freedom of thought is good in itself.”

That is worth emphasising: “a critically literate citizenry ... competent to explore and interrogate the assumptions behind the paradigms of national and economic life reigning at any given moment”.

The dedication proclaims our mission to address the challenges of our society.

At the risk of being trite, these include such daunting questions as:

- The decay of the one planet we have;

¹ JVO Reid, Deputy Vice-Chancellor 1981-1990

² JM Coetzee in his foreword to John Higgins' *Academic Freedom in a democratic South Africa 2013*

- Poverty and inequality;
- Alienation from the prevailing unjust social and political order; and
- A body politic that reeks with the stench of corruption and maladministration.

It is I suppose tempting to give up, and – especially if one is one of the haves of the world – to carry on as if there is nothing one can do about it. That hedonistic option is not open to a university and certainly not to UCT in 2015 or 2016.

This evening we have heard of the work of the new fellow³; and how this work is addressing the challenges of multi-drug resistant TB. Later this evening we will be given brief introductions to the work of those of you who are to graduate with PhDs. These are but examples, the tip of the iceberg if you like, of the too-often-hidden work done by members of this university in attempting to address these challenges.

And engaged scholarship – or socially responsive work – has become an important facet of university work in the past decade; some examples of this work have been marked by University Social Responsiveness awards at two earlier ceremonies today.

This, too, is evidence of commitment to this part of the dedication.

It seems to me important that each of us takes on these challenges in his/her/their way. Does it make a difference? Yes: as a visitor to these shores said in a speech given in this hall nearly 50 years ago said: ⁴

“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centres of energy and daring, those ripples build a current that can sweep down the mightiest wall of oppression and hope.”

Not all – in fact probably very few contributions – consist of headline grabbing activism. Some will be the contributions of poets and writers who help us see our humanity; others may devise technologies that make a difference. All contribute to the stream that becomes the current.

We are to strive for excellence in teaching and research.

A former vice-chancellor⁵ (before she became VC) in a paper titled “Standards – A loaded term” argued that while access was important, it was equally important to establish acceptable standards with objective criteria to measure performance, to maintain standards and finally to continue efforts to raise standards at all levels of performance. She went on to argue that South Africa could not – and this is as true now – afford low standards. She urged that we encourage a culture of excellence in performance for the inculcation of a climate of high expectations and support for the achievement of high standards of performance. At the same time she urged students to take greater responsibility in the learning process.

³ Keertan Dheda

⁴ Robert Kennedy, 7 June 1966

⁵ Dr MA Ramphele, when she was a DVC

In today's three congregations, UCT will confer record numbers of postgraduate degrees and a record number of PhDs. They are the outcome of this continuous striving for excellence.

Her challenge was to all of us; the dedication reminds us of it.

For me the most terrifying of the parables in the New Testament⁶ is that of the talents. We are given talents, and heaven forbid if we do not use them, and to the full. As Milton put it: "that one talent that is death to hide"⁷.

So each of you graduating today is exhorted to strive for excellence in your future careers, to use your talents to the full, in the service of this country and this continent.

The dedication goes on to exhort us to celebrate our founders, benefactors and those who have built the fabric and nourished the value of UCT.

This university and most like it would not do what it does without benefaction. And there are of course many good things that we cannot do because we do not have the money to do them, and would be able to do with greater benefaction.

For the past 35 years, but especially before the establishment of NSFAS⁸ in the late 1990s, UCT has been able to widen access by providing financial aid, academic support/development and housing. Some of this provision is now institutionalised: for all of it benefaction was the catalyst and for some years the mainstay. This is reason enough to celebrate our benefactors.

But should we be critical recipients?

Should we be concerned about the source of the wealth that is behind the proffered gift?

And how should we honour benefactors?

This hall was the focal point of the architectural set-piece conceived by the university's brilliant young architect, JM Solomon. But by 1930 – the time it came to be built as originally conceived, and Solomon had tragically ended his life – the Great Depression had "settled on the country"⁹.

Now, a decade earlier, friends of Jameson, who had died in London in 1917, had offered to raise £100 000 for the assembly hall that was to be the crowning glory of the new buildings, with a dome atop. But by 1930 receipts and pledges had fallen far short of the target; in fact just more than £30 000 had been received. So the plans were "rigorously abridged", the dome was not to be, and this hall was built. It was named after Jameson. He had been premier of the Cape for four years. He had no association with UCT or its predecessor the South African College. I will come back to that.

Our founders in 1829 had set out to establish an institution that they hoped would be fully South African. In the 1930s, that vision had been realised in one dimension: though the dominant (and, for

⁶ Mathew's Gospel, chapter 25.

⁷ John Milton's *On his blindness*

⁸ The National Student Financial Aid Scheme

⁹ Howard Phillips, *UCT 1918-1948*

many, alienating) culture was English, there was significant proportion of Afrikaans-speaking students. As UCT's historian¹⁰ has observed of the time: "many Afrikaners at UCT felt strangers on a campus which commemorated Rhodes and Jameson in a very concrete way".

With that lesson from history we should not have been surprised by the avalanche of support garnered by the RhodesMustFall campaign in 2015. For the UCT student of 2015, Rhodes was not merely anti-Afrikaner but the personification¹¹ of racial capital that led to the subjugation of the majority of South Africans.

It is part of our history that friends of Jameson started a fund for this assembly hall and raised a third of what it cost. The Afrikaans-speaking students of the 1930s had to accept in Rhodes and Jameson daily reminders of the British imperial project; the staff and students of 2015 and 2016 will not accept daily reminders of what Rhodes and Jameson have come to represent. And it therefore seems to me that we must accept – and I hope also celebrate – the fact that the university we love will be a better place when this hall has a new name.

But what of Rhodes, the benefactor? What do we make of the fact that the land for this campus was his to give and that he had at an early stage mooted the idea that it should be the seat of the South African university he strove for? What are we to make of how he amassed his fortune? Perhaps, in a way of reparation, we may need to re-double our efforts to ensure access to UCT to those who cannot afford to pay tuition, housing and other fees. For UCT to do this will require increased benefaction. That it seems to me is reason enough to celebrate our benefactors past, present and future.

The dedication continues by wishing you who graduate today courage, wisdom and purpose.

Why these three? I can do no better than borrow, this time from a novelist¹², writing about writing. He advised that:

"the young man or woman writing today [this was in 1950] must teach himself that the basest of all things is to be afraid, and teaching himself that, forget it forever, leaving no room in his heart for anything but the old verities and truths of the heart.... Until he does so, he labours under a curse. He writes not of love but of lust, of defeats in which nobody loses anything of value, of victories without hope, and worst of all without pity or compassion. His griefs grieve on no bones, leaving no scars. ... Until he learns these things, he will write as though he stood among and watched the end of man. I decline to accept the end of man. ... He is immortal ... because he has a soul, a spirit capable of compassion and sacrifice and endurance."

So, yes: we wish you courage, and wisdom and purpose.

And finally the dedication ends with the invocation that those who leave UCT to learn and work elsewhere will be sustained by a love of truth, and of learning and of this, our university.

¹⁰ Howard Phillips

¹¹ It matters not that Rhodes was not alone in c19 in the views that he held or the way in which he amassed his wealth. Rhodes was the target of the Rhodes Must Fall movement because he was the easily identifiable personification of what he represented.

¹² William Faulkner, Nobel acceptance speech

Truth, yes.

Learning, yes.

And of this, our university?

For 29 years your certificates have borne my signature.

Another officer of this university¹³, who had co-incidentally served this university for 29 years in that office, ended his farewell address to the congregation in the following way and I can do no better than echo what he said. In doing so, I hope I speak for all of tonight's graduates who are to leave UCT this year. He said:

“My formal association with this university will shortly come to an end; my love for her will endure.”

Thank you.

Hugh Amoore
19 December 2015

¹³ H F Oppenheimer: Chancellor 1967 to 1996