

Graduation 2013

Acceptance Speech by Honorary Graduate Annie Lennox

There's something immensely gratifying about earning an achievement or reaching a goal. We feel vindicated and relieved, as well as experiencing a heady mix of disbelief and jubilation.

Unbeknown to us, we've all been grappling with issues of achievement and survival from the very beginning of our existence.

Even at a cellular level - From the moment of our conception, the fundamental life struggle has already started, and it continues on for the rest of our lives...Manifesting in infinite ways.

Your graduation certificates are affirmative proof and recognition that you have each undertaken a course of study and assimilation of knowledge, and in many ways, your lives have been permanently influenced and transformed by this experience. The pieces of paper you hold today are testimony and confirmation of this fact, and you can take real pride and satisfaction from it.

The state of all existence from day to day, or moment to moment is continuously changing. In the chaotic world around us, many of us wish we could have more control over our lives. Sometimes it seems as if we have a handle on everything... It's all going smoothly. Our ducks are all lined up in a row, and we feel like masters of our own destiny. At other times a curve ball suddenly and inexplicably throws us off track, leaving us feeling totally fragile and inconsequential.

This is the precarious and paradoxical nature of being human.

One thing is guaranteed. There will be moments of victory and moments of defeat. The challenges you've faced and overcome are actually practice runs for whatever lies ahead.

The university of life will take you by surprise in more ways that you could ever imagine. Truth really is stranger than fiction. I can personally vouch for that. This is why we dare to dream. This is why we risk pushing our boundaries towards new adventures and experiences.

We are all mythical heroes and heroines in the narratives of our lives, whether we realise it or not...We are all parts of an interactive- collective-connected planet. As well as being individuals, we are part of "the whole" of nature and humanity dependent and reliant on each other.

That is the reason why the struggle for sustainability - Justice and human rights is fundamental to our existence.

It's not about "us" and "them"...It's about ALL of us.

Until we shift our limited paradigm, we remain in a kind of insulated bubble in a divided world that seems to be so often defined by race, gender, culture or whatever religion, band or football team you identify with and subscribe to...

And it goes on - The school or college you attended, the clothes you wear, the car you drive, your social connections, your fame or infamy etc...

But when you take the opportunity to step out of the box, beyond your familiar frames of reference, you come to realise just how limited your thinking has been.

This is something I've been privileged to experience many times, through my travels and life journeys, and I'm grateful for every lesson learned, and every encounter that has shattered the confines of my perspective.

I'm an idealist. It seems to have been baked into my DNA for some reason. It's not an easy gig. You can't avoid seeing things that you think shouldn't happen. Injustice, inequity, indifference, cruelty, racism, sexism.

The world just isn't fair, and inconceivably bad things happen all the time. You don't have to look very far to encounter them. All you have to do is walk outside your front door to witness the madness in the world.

Having encountered this madness, and become increasingly aware of it, the challenge is to find constructive ways to exist and respond, without losing balance.

People ask me all the time, about HIV/AIDS for example... They'll say "I've heard about the AIDS pandemic in Africa...but I don't know what to do".

The answer is, of course, both simple and complex. You do what you're drawn to do. And if you're interested enough, you figure out what your contribution is going to be.

You start by becoming aware, by being concerned, by breaking through your indifference, passivity, cynicism or intolerance. You transform. You become passionate. You become an activist.

Whenever I use the word "activist" I always think of Anita Roddick, the founder of the Body Shop, who was a cherished friend and inspiration to so many people.

Anita was activism personified. She was driven by curiosity and concern for the planetary challenges we face. She had the most expansive heart and the keenest mind, and was fuelled by a burning passion that lit up in her eyes like a bright flame. She was warm, funny and deeply kind. Being in her company was the best example as to how a person could fully engage with life.

There are those whose light shines through, despite the darkness, very often in spite of, or because of terrible personal loss and sacrifice.

Amazing individuals like Doreen Laurence, the mother of Steven Laurence, whose tenacity and courage long fight for justice for the racist murder of her son, is simply humbling.

And Malala Yousafzai, the outstanding 16 year old teenage girl from Pakistan, and youngest nominee for a Nobel Peace Prize, who was shot in the head and neck by men who don't want girls to receive an education. She recently told a delegation of 500 young people "Let us pick up our books and pens. They are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one pen and one book can change the world. Education is the only solution".

The people who inspire me are often brilliant visionaries with extraordinary minds...Artists, writers, film makers, musicians, geniuses. Exceptional individuals living exceptionally creative lives but more than often, I'm bowled over by people who express extraordinary acts of courage, sacrifice and kindness, in ways that more than often go overlooked and unnoticed on a daily basis.

Inspiration can be found everywhere, if you're willing to recognise it. What is most important of all is to find your own passion. Make it yours, to share with the world, and follow it through.

Graduates, today represents one step in the journey of thousands...Walk it well. Engage in it fully. Let all your kites fly high in the wind, and may all your boats sail smoothly! Thank you.