

Graduation Speech 2015

I would like to start by thanking our first year students and staff involved in the catering, hosting, decorating and the wonderfully vibrant show put on last night – and thank you Alan for your kind, heartfelt and impromptu message – in the midst of technological breakdown - on behalf of the parents to the staff of RCN for taking care of your children over the past two years.

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all our guests here today - from parents and families to members of the RCN Board, from our partners in Fjaler to representatives from the Norwegian Red Cross and SOS Children's Villages Norway.

I would also like to take this opportunity to give a special welcome to Laila Bokhari – who currently serves as State Secretary for the Prime Minister of Norway. Beyond her career in international affairs and security, Laila is a committed advocate of the global right to education and works tirelessly for a college in Pakistan which offers free elementary, college and vocational education to over 650 students, primarily girls and young women. Thank you, Laila, for kindly offering to give the farewell address to this year's graduates – it is a great privilege to welcome you to our College.

Today is a day of great celebration.

I shall remember our graduates vividly – and I would like to thank you for your support, guidance and generosity of spirit over the past two years. After the fast and challenging pace of your RCN experience, today is a day for turning back momentarily and allowing a heartfelt joy to catch up with you.

As part of Student Introduction Week, we invited you to sit here in the auditorium one evening and write a letter to yourself either in English or, if appropriate, your native language and to outline confidentially your feelings, your concerns, your dreams and sage advice to yourself as you embarked on your RCN journey. We have kept them sealed and undisturbed - and, as a new addition to the ceremony, we shall hand the letter back to you when you come later to pick up your RCN diploma. This, we hope, connects the student you have become at the point of departure with the student you were on arrival.

I learnt at the biannual Heads' meeting last week at UWC Mahindra that the current ratio of applicants to UWC places is 14:1 - testimony to the increasing competition for these scholarships but also a reminder of the responsibility of each of you to have taken full advantage of the opportunities you have received over the past two years given your selection ahead of thirteen others.

As you return to your seat or find a quiet moment later today, I hope that you can read your letter with pride as to what you have achieved in your time at this College.

At the heart of the UWC educational model is deliberate diversity - it is important to us that we seek deliberate diversity in terms of intake and that, at this point, a diverse cohort of graduates set out on individual adventures.

By coming to this College and choosing a UWC education, you have chosen certainly a life less ordinary - full of stimulation, deliberately disorientating dilemmas, laughter and challenges to your inner resilience here in our unique wilderness location - and, I imagine in the years to come you will, in the words of the American poet Robert Frost, often take the 'road less travelled by' and will discover that this choice 'shall make all the difference'.

There will be obstacles and flooded rivers to cross - but we hope what you have learnt proves invaluable for the journey ahead. This College here in the heartland of Fjaler has helped, in some small way, to forge you. It is no coincidence that the crest of Fjaler - seen on entering our Commune and in today's programme - depicts a set of bridges in reference to the beautiful stone bridges built in the 18th century for travellers on the postal route running north from Bergen to Trondheim.

Together we have built bridges.

We aim to teach you to test yourselves in order that you acquire the skills necessary to navigate through dangers and deceptions of the road ahead. Here at RCN we invite our students to take 'the road less travelled' and to discover new frontiers - equipped with a moral compass, a journal of experience and a pioneering sense of adventure.

It has been our responsibility as staff here at RCN to accompany you on your journey so far - not as your friends but as your guides, charged by your families and National Committees to help steer you to this day. A good teacher, a good guide is one who makes himself or herself '*progressively unnecessary*' [Thomas Carruthers].

This is an opportunity for me to invite our graduates to show their appreciation to their families (here and back home), their host families, and to Education and Support Staff for the unstinting support they have received on the road so far.

Your way will be marked by the northern lights - aurora borealis (the dawn of the North). As we learnt in the inaugural Thor Heyerdahl Lecture on RCN's Environmental Pillar in March, the northern lights have been interpreted in a multitude of ways through time - from dead maidens dancing to the reflection of the shields of the Valkyries, from omens of suffering to the light you can hear.

On several occasions this year, the northern lights have appeared over the College - students, staff, visitors and patients have rushed to the upper road and onto balconies to marvel at this distinctively magical experience. The northern lights are indeed a source of wonder, inspiration and, for many, a spectacular symbol of life.

This is undoubtedly an exciting time for our graduates, with new paths ahead, important challenges on the horizon - with stars and the northern lights to mark your way. For all of you, in some sense, it is a journey into the unknown, into risk - towards life's improbabilities. What you learn about yourself and your friends along the way is at the heart of the experience - and I am certain that the invaluable friendships forged here with fellow students will nourish you for many years to come.

From time to time, you will pick up your RCN kaleidoscope and images and experiences caught immortal in your memory will help you to draw strength for the next step. As one second year captured so perceptively in her letter of introduction to the Davis Scholarship Programme earlier this term:

'Here is where we have students who are truly interesting and interested, staff who are really inspiring and inspired, and together we create an engaged and engaging community that actively cares and supports each other's dreams and ambitions, for ourselves and for the world'

This is perhaps the finest articulation I have come across of the strength of this College and which should certainly stand at the heart of RCNs Strategic 2020 vision.

In the spirit of Kurt Hahn, we hope that we have encouraged you to develop 'an enterprising curiosity, an indefatigable spirit, tenacity in pursuit and, above all, compassion.' But, on the journey ahead, beware the trappings of entitlement, selfishness, and the untimely desertion of humility.

We received an insightful email in January from a student who graduated last year about her experiences at university. She wrote of the strong UWC community you will all be heading into post RCN and that, on reflection, 'the miracle of UWC seems to be simple: it creates fearless individuals'.

We strive to introduce you to UWC values, Red Cross principles and the Nordic spirit and, in some way, to contribute to forging 'fearless individuals' for the path ahead.

Two weeks ago I found myself in one of the most stimulating meetings of my career as an educator - 90 minutes with Yves Daccord, the Director General of the International Committee of the Red Cross. Our discussion ranged from the changing landscape of humanitarian aid to the challenges ahead for the ICRC, from digital developments to digital warfare, from RCN's responsibility to produce ethical leaders of tomorrow to the possibility of establishing a UWC in the Middle East. I came away inspired and, at the same time, troubled by the highly polarized world awaiting our latest cohort of RCN graduates - a world where more money is spent on ice cream than on education, and where fresh conflicts and ancient fault lines dominate the news.

What sustains us as educators at RCN is hope – hope that you, aware of the unique privilege of a UWC education, in turn give back in some shape or form and strive, throughout your lives, to build a peaceful and more sustainable future.

This is our hope.

Finally, one of the highlights of the year for me was when we hosted Sigrid Moldestad and her band here in the auditorium for a concert one Friday afternoon towards the end of winter. The combination of fiddle and folk music triggered an unexpected standing ovation. She spun an enchanting thread between the songs and introduced us to the life and poetry of a poet from the fjords - Jan-Magnus Bruheim. One of her songs used the lyrics of a Bruheim poem - coincidentally the same Nynorsk poem that is left on the pillow of incoming patients to the Rehabilitation Centre with which we share a campus. It pictures an old man reflecting rather wistfully on a life gone by: *'So he was racing through life / Without catching it / A joy was running after him on the road / but never caught up.'*

In the years to come, we trust that the wisdom of Bruheim sustains you for the path ahead and that you learn, at times, to let a heartfelt joy catch up with you. There shall be tears today - of relief, of delight, of sadness - and I sincerely hope that you turn to allow joy to catch you up and give you one energizing RCN bear hug of an embrace.

As you draw strength for the next step – *'half turn to go yet turning stay'* [Christina Rossetti] - beyond the secure and supportive world of Red Cross Nordic, please take a moment to reflect on the magic of the place – and, at the same time, reflect that you are a part of a larger, compelling hope which radiates today from our fjord.

For you, in many ways, are our northern lights turning darkness into light.

And as the bus this afternoon bumps over the familiar road to Flekke, remember the immortal line of the cartoonist Dr Seuss: 'Don't cry because it's over, smile because it happened'.

It has been a privilege to be your Rektor.

God tur vidare

Richard D A Lamont

Rektor

UWC Red Cross Nordic