

Mr Simpiwe Somdyala

Walter Sisulu University graduation

12 May 2014

Esteemed Chancellor of Walter Sisulu University, Dr Brigalia Bam

Members of the Walter Sisulu University Council

Interim Vice-Chancellor of Walter Sisulu University, Professor Khaya Mfenyana

Members of the Institutional Management Committee

Chairperson of Convocation Ms Nomnikelo Puzi

Student Representative Council Presidents

Staff of Walter Sisulu University

Government Dignitaries from National, Provincial and Local Government

Invited Guests from the business sector and the many communities of Walter Sisulu University

Graduands and your families and friends

I am honoured and humbled to be with you today. It is 24 years ago since my graduation from this University referred to then as the University of Transkei. So many things have changed.

In preparing what I will be sharing with you today I researched. I had this beautiful speech that I thought would make me sound like a professor. It had all the quotes and statistics one can imagine. My wife okayed it – and I was happy.

On Saturday morning I gave it to my son to look at and tell me if he would be inspired by it. After 30 minutes or so he came back and said: 'daddy your speech is boring. I was not inspired by it at all. All the quotes and statistics we are aware of. Inspire people by telling them about your own experiences.'

Remember this fellow was just voting now for the first time - but I obliged.

There are three things I want to talk about.

First: **We experience turning points in our lives.**

Some of the turning points are self-conscious, some are about career choices and some are imposed on us by circumstances – a death of a loved one, a word said to us, an accident, etc.

I want to share one of mine with you. It was in 1987. I had passed matric with exemption the previous year. My mother and I had agreed that I must find a job as she had no money to take me to university – which was what I wanted. I accepted the fact and prepared myself for a career with standard 10 – being a clerk or any of those things.

As everyone was preparing for school around February my grandmother asked:

“Simpwiwe what are you going to do?” And I told her about the situation.

She was angry...and asked: “with a standard 10 what do you think you will do? You are as good as not educated and there are no jobs for people with no education.”

Coming from an uneducated person who at the time understood the value of education – I had no reply to the question. I had seen some of my cousins toiling with no work having standard 10 not finding a job. Worse trying to find a job at Cofimvaba.

That was on a Sunday and the next day, together with my grandmother, we went to borrow money. I was in Mthatha the following Wednesday trying to register at the University of Transkei. As I waited in anticipation for my acceptance, seeing former classmates who were already admitted was heart breaking and I would sometimes cry. I was admitted and the following year got a bursary. The rest is history.

What are the lessons?

- a) For all the advices you get and you will continue to get there is a message from your inner or true self, to the self that you identify with. Always listen to that message – hear it and understand what it means. Always have a purpose in life.
- b) Surround yourself with people that make a positive contribution in your life. Jamie Falahee eloquently captures the point when he says: ‘It is important to make an effort with those people in your life who are kind, who love you, and who are a positive influence in your life. And, of course, it is just important that

you also try to be kind, loving, and positive so that those people want to be around you as well.'

c) Act! The lesson from my grandmother is that – act on the decisions you take.

Many times we procrastinate and lose out in the process.

d) Lastly it is the impact of words and things we hear and choose to listen. My grandmother's words about the importance and value of education remain a powerful guiding light. I loved my grandmother and never wanted to disappoint her. I actually did more than the junior degree she wanted me to have.

You are here today, graduating, because your parents, guardians, family and friends believed in you. There are many who advised and encouraged you to do more and not to give up – and you dare not disappoint them.

Listen to advice, hear that voice, believe in yourselves, stay focused and dare to dream. Continue to seek new knowledge as those who have stopped learning live in a world that no longer exists.

In his secular sermon, Beyond Words' Ben describes the power words when he said.

'It sometimes seems to me that our days are poisoned with too many words. Words said and not meant. Words said 'and' meant. Words divorced from feeling. Wounding words. Words that conceal. Words that reduce. Dead words.

If only words were a kind of fluid that collects in the ears, if only they turned into the visible chemical equivalent of their true value, an acid, or something curative – then we might be more careful. Words do collect in us anyway. They collect in the blood, in the soul, and either transform or poison people’s lives. Bitter or thoughtless words poured into the ears of the young have blighted many lives in advance. We all know people whose unhappy lives twist on a set of words uttered to them on a certain unforgotten day at school, in childhood, or at university.

We seem to think that words aren’t things. A bump on the head may pass away, but a cutting remark grows with the mind. But then it is possible that we know all too well the awesome power of words – which is why we use them with such deadly and accurate cruelty.’

Second: Africa’s place in the world has changed.

The world’s economy has changed dramatically in the last decade. Our beloved continent is increasingly seen as an important economic force, with massive potential. Much of the Western world is economically stagnant, but emerging economies are thriving overall. Africa’s collective GDP is projected to reach USD2.6 trillion by 2020. We’ll also be more connected than ever before: since 2000, 316 million new mobile phone subscribers have signed up in Africa.

Cellphone use has increased by 20% a year for the last five years, and we know the role of social media in economic and political change in a number of African states. My twins are in Grade 1 and today they use iPads at school. They have moved beyond the desk top, lap top to iPads. I only saw a desk top when I joined this university.

I must admit I also battled choosing whether to use my iPad or print a paper when presenting to you. Because I have not seen presentations on iPads on occasions such as this I opted for paper. I guess it is because professors are either my age or older.

So, technological advancement is a massive opportunity. We are unlikely to have a sequential growth from pre industrialization to a services economy.

The African Development Bank estimates that Africa's middle class had grown to 313m people in 2010. That equates to 34% of the continent's population compared to 196 million (27%) in 2000.

We know Africa has mineral wealth. Africa also has 60% of the world's total uncultivated and arable land. We also know that in this Province we are net importers of what we eat every day. In particular, the homeland regions have massive agricultural resources that remain underutilized. Our biggest danger is not building on what we have and exploiting such opportunities to the benefit of the people.

The United Nations has predicted the global population will reach seven billion this year, and climb to nine billion by 2050. To feed all those people, WWF, the conservation organisation estimates that we will need to produce as much food in the next 40 years as we have in the last 8000. That's a challenge and an opportunity, but how do we tackle them? And how can you, today's graduate, harness that?

It is important that we make this important point Madame Chancellor: For the Walter Sisulu University, given its location in particular relating to economic endowments, it is an indictment to all of us that we do not have a strong and vibrant agriculture sciences faculty. I am aware of the many attempts to do so but I would encourage that we should not stop pursuing it if we are to be relevant and a responsive institutions rooted in our communities.

The Goldman Sachs study released in November last year has found significant economic and social improvements. The most striking successes have been the creation of a sizeable African middle class, increased real wages for the employed, and support for the poor via social welfare and services. In the decade after 2000, the African middle class more than doubled in size. Real per-capita GDP increased by 40% as 10-million South Africans graduated from the lower-to the middle-and higher-income bands. Members of the African middle class are now the dominant consumers, fuelling a consumer and retail boom.

We have problems, for sure. Two weeks ago Statistics South Africa reported that unemployment has gone up and stands at 25, 2%. This province has one of the highest unemployment rates in the country.

With 70% of the unemployed under age 34, the young are disproportionately affected.

South Africa is still one of the world's most unequal societies.

Only 10% of learners matriculating in SA's basic education system earn a university exemption, and of those, only about 15% eventually graduate. The fact that many of those who do graduate struggle to find work speaks volumes about the state of the SA economy.

A serious consequence of SA's poor education systems is that it effectively sentences thousands of young people to a cycle of generational poverty and results in a vicious cycle of slow economic growth. A recent UCT study found that many unemployed people give up looking for work, which robs them of dignity and self-reliance, and robs the country of its workforce.

As a financial services provider, Old Mutual is alarmed to note that accompanying the rapid rise in the middle class since 1994, indebtedness, or household debt to disposable income, has soared from 57% to 76%. Today, 9.5-million South Africans have impaired credit records and many risk defaulting.

You, today's graduates

How will you carve out careers in this exciting new world? You probably know that the days of massive corporations with intakes of thousands of young people each year are over. But if the age of working for one company your whole life are ending, then the age of the entrepreneur is here, which is why there has never been a more exciting time to be a young African with a good education.

SMMEs are the key to economic growth, locally and globally. As many as 80% of new jobs worldwide are in this sector.

But entrepreneurship is a special talent: some of you here may be gifted animators, graphic artists or public administrators. But society has many talented paupers.

It's important that each of you adds business skills to your skills-set. You're also fortunate that major resources are being allocated to enterprise development. One example is the Masisizane Fund which I head, and which has a strong focus on agri-business, agri-processing, manufacturing, supply chain and franchising. We also aim to promote business in rural, small towns and townships, providing entrepreneurship skills as well as finance.

State institutions such as SEDA, SEFA and private sector organisations also need to be transformed to better serve you as you look at new opportunities.

Third and last: **Work hard and stay positive**

I have referred to the turning points you will encounter in in your lives and the alluded to the state of the economy. I believe, from my own experience, that hard work, staying true to who you are, being positive and having a purpose in life is key to success.

In his book, *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell makes important observation and conclusions about what defines successful people. He theorises that success is determined, not just by talent, but by opportunities. He looked, for example, at the opportunities which Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, John Lennon had and how they seized them. He asserts that:

- Successful people don't do it alone. Where they come from matters. They are products of particular places and environments. Just like many of you today successful people do not come from rich families. Coming from a village and poor environment does not mean failure. It is such environments that have made most people like Nelson Mandela successful at what they do.
- The sense of possibility so necessary for success comes not just from inside us or from our parents. It comes from our time; from the particular opportunities that our particular place in history presents us with. Not only do you graduate in a free South Africa today but also an Africa that is rising and entrepreneurial opportunities that you should seize – whether becoming a singer, a miller, an artist or an engineer. You graduate at a time when knowledge matters more than ever before. Advancement in technology have changed the way we do business and interact with each other.

- Hard work – the 10 000 hour rule. If you work hard enough and assert yourself, and use your mind and imagination, you can shape the world to your desires. Achievement is talent plus preparation. Hard work is only a prison sentence when you lack motivation. We need effort and investment, not just plans and policies.

In his book Hiring on a WHIM Darren Barret shares lessons that I would like you to always think about and remind yourselves as you seek new opportunities – whether a job or a business venture.

Miller asserts that there are four qualities that lead to greatness: work ethic, integrity, maturity and humility.

Work ethic – a set of values based on the moral virtues of hard work and diligence. These values are acquired early and become part of one's DNA. A work ethic may be improved later in life but it is nonnegotiable and non-teachable, you must hire people who already possess this quality.

Integrity – is the backbone of all relationships – personal and professional. It is the innate ability to do what is right, even when forces are telling and pulling one to do otherwise. This quality is developed early and is part of your moral make up.

Maturity – this is an essential quality that brings internal and emotional stability. Often seen as someone who is wise beyond his or her years; someone who has a seriousness, thoughtfulness, who is deliberate in thought and action and who is poised in grace under pressure. Aldous Huxley puts it aptly: “experience is not what happens to you; it is what you do with what happens to you.”

Humility – a person who is willing and able to be taught, a person who knows they haven't 'arrived' yet. Humility is the ability and willingness to be taught.

Consider yourselves enormously fortunate for the following: you live on a continent whose massive potential is only now being realised. You live in a country with a powerful role to play in that continent, and your careers have begun at a time when entrepreneurs are sorely needed and are being given resources to succeed. We have just held elections and have a government whose manifesto has made strong reference to job creation, entrepreneurship and small business development. It is your responsibility to put it to the test with your fresh, bright and practical ideas.

In conclusion, allow me to quote once again Ben Okri when he says:

‘The greatest inspiration, the most sublime ideas of living that have come down to humanity come from a higher realm, a happier realm, a place of pure dreams, a heaven of blessed notions. Ideas and infinite possibilities dwell there in absolute tranquility.’

You have an opportunity to live extraordinary lives. Live your own not the other person's dreams. Listen to the words of advice and surround yourself with people that matter - but know very well that 'your destiny is in your own hands'. Turn your circumstances into opportunity as you are the master of your own future. Remember always that – it is hard work, self-belief and determination that will lead you to success.

Congratulations to you all.

Thank You.