

“AMAZEMENT, WONDER AND AWE”
CAMPION COLLEGE GRADUATION ADDRESS
11th December 2019

Very Reverend Tony Percy, Vicar General of the Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn;

Reverend Fathers;

Reverend Sister Marie Levey RSJ;

Mr Joe de Bruyn – Chair of the Board of Trustees of Campion College; Dr Paul Morrissey – President of Campion College;

The Hon Julie Owens MP;

The Hon Kevin Conolly MP;

Distinguished Academics;

Graduates, diplomates and your families;

Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for the honour of inviting me to address you on this important day in your lives and, first, my warmest congratulations on your graduation.

It's customary for speakers at graduations to try to communicate to graduates some words of wisdom that they will treasure and I mused on what they might be.

One message

I was once asked by a young woman, who was the editor of a University student newspaper: "If you had just one message/piece of advice/warning for students, what would it be?" What a daunting question. What could be important enough to be that "one message"?

I decided that what we all know to be important – family, friends, love, trust and so on – should not be the focus of my message. So, as I always do when faced with a complex and difficult decision, and this is my first piece of advice, I decided to "trust my unconscious" – put the issue at the back of my mind and wait. Here's the message it came up with: You should be open to experiencing "amazement, wonder and awe", in as many situations and as often as possible.

For me, an experience of amazement, wonder and awe can occur in a myriad of settings.

For instance, in one of the oldest places above sea on Earth, the Northern Flinders Ranges of South Australia, standing in a dry creek bed full of huge, hundreds of years old River Gums that seemed like tiny specks beside the 650 million years old towering rock faces behind them.

Or watching a video resulting from pointing the Hubble Telescope at a seemingly blank patch of sky and detecting over three thousand galaxies at the edge of the universe, each containing billions of stars.

Likewise, in learning that all the atoms in our body come from stardust and are billions of years old. Imagine the wonder we would experience on Ash Wednesday if we said "Remember man thou art stardust and unto stardust thou shalt return"!

Or just in musing on how beautiful my Bengal cat's movements are.

In short, we stand in amazement, wonder and awe before Nature/Creation.

I believe that experiencing amazement, wonder and awe enriches our lives, can help us to find meaning, and can change how we see the world, the decisions we make, especially regarding values and ethics, and how we live our lives.

Take, for instance, encouraging people to act responsibly to protect our environment and its ecosystems. If we stand in amazement wonder and awe before Creation and are deeply grateful for it and see ourselves as having obligations to protect it, we will act very differently from how we would behave if we see ourselves as entitled to exploit it just for our own benefit, no matter the consequences for others.

Choosing our area of work

Valuing and having such experiences can also cause us to choose differently, to rearrange our priorities, on a very personal everyday level, for instance, in choosing our area of work.

When we have a choice between taking a job in an area to which we are passionately committed -- one where our heart is -- and one in an area to which we are not committed, but pays much more money, we are more likely to choose guided by our heart, if we want to maximize our chances of experiencing "amazement, wonder and awe".

We can't manufacture these experiences, but our choices can make them more - or less - likely to occur. I count as one of the major blessings in my life that, even after more than 40 years in the "same job", almost every morning I walk into my office thinking "What 'exciting' experiences will I have today?"

For that outcome to occur, we also need to take calculated risks and not expect upfront guarantees that all our endeavours will reward us, as we might hope they will. I've found that very often the requests that I receive to participate in various projects or events that I believe will be the most exciting and rewarding intellectually and emotionally are often not so, and some events that I reluctantly participate in out of a sense of obligation are such.

We should value, as well, a very broad range of both positive and negative experiences, both our successes and our mistakes and failures, whether personal, professional, intellectual, emotional or spiritual: we can learn and grow as persons from all of them. I like Thomas Jefferson's advice: "It's not your failures that count; it's what you do with them".

We should not be surprised or depressed by our failures, although, as I well know, sometimes, it can be difficult not to be. That is no way meant to say that we should not take our mistakes seriously and try to avoid the same ones in the future.

To have one's heart, mind and soul engaged by one's work, to be excited and fulfilled by what one does, is indeed an extraordinary gift. To be able to be hopeful at the end of the day, that you might have made a tiny contribution to others and a better world is a true privilege. To have had a small, personal experience of the axiom that "one person can make a difference" gives meaning to one's work and life.

Transcendence

I wasn't sure in which order to place the words "amazement, wonder and awe", and in thinking about that I realized they were not necessarily a linear progression, but three different, although connected, entry doors into an experience of transcendence – the experience of feeling that you belong to something larger than just yourself and that what you do or don't do matters, more than to just yourself.

Cynicism

Such experiences of transcendence can be a powerful antidote to cynicism, in particular, about whether values and ethics matter or will be implemented, in practice. I regard such cynicism as extremely dangerous, as, what I would call, a "secular mortal sin". It could result in a future world in which no reasonable person would want to live.

Hope

The antithesis of cynicism is hope, the oxygen of the human spirit.

Without hope our human spirit dies; with it we can overcome even seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

Obligations to future generations

Hope involves a sense of connection to the future and that raises the issue of our obligations to future generations, which is a central question in protecting the ecosystem of our planet Earth. Amazement, wonder and awe can bond us to others who also have this experience and thereby help us to find, as a collective, the wisdom, restraint and courage we need to hold our world on trust for future generations. To do that we each need to feel that we are a member of a community consisting of past, present and future generations.

In making immensely important societal decisions, post-modern societies, such as Australia, are rejecting wisdom from history and failing to look to consequences. They focus just on the present and only on the impact on the individual. This is a combination of "intense individualism" and what I call "presentism".

Our First Nations Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have much to teach us in this regard. They consult "human memory" and through collective human imagination they look to the future that they will leave to their descendants – their "mob". They are not stuck just in the present as many post-modern societies are and Aboriginal Dreaming looks beyond always giving priority to individual autonomy to protection of both the common good and vulnerable people.

Science and religion

So how might the ideas and concepts I've described apply to some current ethical issues being debated in the public square, many of which involve science?

It's a popular belief that science and religion are antithetical and in conflict. I absolutely disagree. They're linked because they both involve, or at least should involve, experiences of amazement, wonder and awe.

I've already spoken of experiencing amazement, wonder and awe at Creation. But what 21st Century science reveals and the astonishing new powers it gives us, which no humans before us have ever had, should elicit the same response, especially because that response has an important role to play in making ethical decisions about what we should and, even more importantly, should not do with that science.

Socrates said that wonder is the beginning of wisdom and we certainly need wisdom in governing the new science. Depending on how we use science, it can generate hope or despair. We need ethics to guide science so it generates hope.

Unlike any humans before us, we hold the essence of life itself, including human life, in the palm of our collective human hand and its future is more and more under our control.

Think about the massive expansion in the spectrum of our knowledge in the last 50 plus years. For instance, deep outer space exploration with astrophysics and deep inner space exploration with genetic research, has increased enormously what we know, but in doing so has even more vastly expanded the area of what we now know that we don't know.

A Japanese saying explains that in this way: As the *radius of knowledge* expands the circumference of ignorance increases. Imagine what we learn from science as being like a laser beam piercing the darkness of our unknowing. The further out it goes the larger the circumference and therefore the area of our unknowing that it opens up. We now know so much more than previously, that we know that we know hardly anything.

Recognizing this vast and ever-expanding *Mystery of the Unknown* which science opens up can, and I believe should, elicit amazement which leads us into an experience of wonder and awe which, in turn, can elicit gratitude and hope that fosters ethics. I have written this as what I call "The Wonder Equation": $AWA - C \rightarrow G + H \rightarrow E$

Lemmings

Sometimes, it's very difficult to be ethical. But we shouldn't give up in despair – good guys do win out, even if only in the long run.

Let me tell you about a remarkable experiment by some philosophers of science. We used to refer to philosophers as spending their days counting how many angels could sit on the head of a pin. Today, they are using computers to create sequential, computer-generated, decision-making sets. They generate, for instance, five thousand consecutive decisions or ten thousand consecutive decisions.

In one of these experiments, the philosophers divided a computer screen in two and then each half into two equal-sized groups of tiny squares, each square representing a decision maker: one group they called rats, the other lemmings.

The rats (the bad guys) were represented by red squares. They always decided just in their own self-interest and without regard to the welfare of others. The lemmings (the good guys) were yellow squares. They did the opposite; they tried to protect others, their relationships and the community, as well as themselves.

At first, the rats won. Initially, the yellow squares disappeared very quickly; the lemmings were losing badly. But eventually, the lemmings started to come back; yellow squares began to appear among the red ones.

What was extremely interesting and the most important message from this study was that as long as a small cohesive cluster of lemmings remained, they were not lost forever; they came back - eventually ethics was spreading again throughout the society. But if that small group was lost, if their number fell below a small critical mass, the whole graph turned red and could not be reversed. So, one ethical person plus a few ethical friends really matters ethically.

It's a message that's both hopeful and fearful. A few ethical voices crying in the moral wilderness do matter and can make a major difference. But loss of those voices causes a complete loss of ethics. You must make sure that doesn't happen.

Conclusion

So, to sum up, my one piece of advice to you as, today, you leave your alma mater, Campion College: It is that in making decisions which will affect your life you should give much weight to considerations of where you are most likely to find meaning, experience transcendence - the feeling of belonging to something bigger than just yourself - and encounter amazement, wonder and awe.

This is a wonderful day for you and your families and friends - may you celebrate it with great joy and hope for the future. And may you remain, throughout long, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually rich personal and professional lives, the very best examples of ethical lemmings.

Be not afraid. Be brave. And may you always be Blessed. Thank you.

Margaret Somerville
St. Patrick's Cathedral, Parramatta
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