

Occasional Address

Royal Exhibition Building, Wednesday 18 December 2019, 11.00am

Associate Professor Parshia Lee-Stecum

Associate Dean Teaching & Learning

Faculty of Arts, University of Melbourne

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, members of the Faculty, Graduates and guests.

The graduation address – as a genre – brings with it one very significant challenge. You have all heard it before – or versions of it. Thoughtful anticipation and advice about what you will go on to do, or sometimes about what you should do. In the western tradition from which universities such as ours developed, there is a long history of advice to those graduating into a new phase of their lives.

In the area of my own studies – Ancient Rome – one of the earliest examples on record is a collection of advice written in the second century BCE by Cato the Elder: a very prominent aristocrat whose stern certainty made him somewhat of a legend even in his own day. Cato addressed this work to his son, Marcus. Presumably, the advice was written to accompany Marcus' own 'graduation' as he assumed the toga virilis (the toga of manhood) and set out on his own career.

Unfortunately, the only section of Cato's work that now survives is a rather paranoid and xenophobic rant about how all doctors were conspiring to kill him and how Marcus would be better off avoiding modern medicine entirely. But the content of the rest of the work is easy enough to guess from Cato's other statements and the general culture of his class and gender at the time: be truthful, adhere to your values, respect your parents and elders... We will never know how Marcus responded. Patiently, perhaps – silently waiting for it to be over so he could get on to much more exciting things.

That's the tradition.

It is not for me – or anyone else here – to tell you what you are going to do, let alone what you should do. You have all demonstrated the capacity to work that out for yourselves. That's part of what has brought you here. What I can do is speak to how I feel about you – and today I am going to flatter myself that I speak for the whole Faculty and University in sharing these feelings. Reflecting on what is now, for me, 21 years of working and caring for the academic programs, the teachers and the students of Arts at this university, I realise there is only really one, very simple, very obvious thing I want to say to you today. You have heard this before, too, of course – to the point that it risks becoming hackneyed from the saying, no matter how sincere and deeply felt. But it is still something I don't think we, as a university community, do, or can, say enough to our wonderful students, graduates and alumni: we are proud of you.

Proud not just for what you will go on to do or be – although we look with excitement to the days ahead -, but proud of what you have already demonstrated.

And I say 'we' are proud because I think that, on a day such as this which is, quite properly, structured by a sense of the institution, of the University, it is more than just a case of the

University being proud of your achievements. It is something more personal. During a tough time in my own life, years ago, someone I very much respect, whom I know as a mentor (my own Cato the Elder), said something that I've come back to many times since: institutions don't – and can't – show loyalty or support; *people* show loyalty, people show support, people show pride.

We all have our communities (typically several) – those that fostered us, those we have come to on the journey, those we will find in the future. At our best – as another old cliché goes - these communities don't divide, they multiply and we find strength in the interweave. I hope that the people of your university community – as anchors in your memory - have added, and will always continue to add to your strength – and, in particular, to your confidence in yourself.

There are many outcomes, many attributes and capabilities that we design our educational programs to provide, and towards which we teach and learn. Likewise, there is an increasing range of indicators by which we evaluate success or otherwise in our learning endeavours. But if I had to choose just one contribution that I hope your studies – and your success in your studies – has brought you, it would be confidence. And by this I mean that very particular confidence that an Arts education can foster: a confidence that is not arrogance but draws from a capacity to reflect critically and honestly upon yourself and the world around you.

But now I am starting to sound like Cato the Elder, and you have all been so patient... Simply, then, to you and all the students I have had the joy to teach and to learn from, I wish you success, I wish you peace, and I wish you confidence. And, most of all, I wish you to know that we are proud of you.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

Today the University welcomes Associate Professor Parshia Lee-Stecum as guest speaker.

Parshia is coming to the end of a long and very successful term of office as Associate Dean Teaching & Learning in the Faculty of Arts.

He studied at the Universities of Tasmania and Cambridge, and worked for three years at Trinity College, Dublin before joining the University of Melbourne in 1998.

Parshia's main research and teaching interests include Roman poetry of the Augustan period (especially Roman elegy), Roman myth and ethnicity, and magic in the Roman world.

Parshia is the Program Director of the Bachelor of Arts, and has wide experience in both public engagement and digital learning in classics education.

Please join me in welcoming Associate Professor Parshia Lee-Stecum.