

Occasional Address
Royal Exhibition Building, Tuesday 12 December 2017 at 11.00am

Professor Uma Kothari

Professor of Migration and Postcolonial Studies and former Director of the Global Development Institute at the University of Manchester

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, graduands, family members and friends.

Graduands, it is such a privilege to be here today, celebrating with you, on your great achievement of graduating from the University of Melbourne, an inspiring institution with such an excellent reputation.

Graduation day is an occasion at which we mark the passage from one stage of life to another. It is one of those seminal moments where we have an opportunity to look back on our journey, how we got where we are today, and the trials and tribulations we overcame along the way. It's a day where we are profoundly in the present, in the here and now, at a juncture, taking in the moment of what it means to graduate from this University.

And it might also be a day where we nervously contemplate what is yet to come, when we start to think about what we want to do next and where we might end up. Some of you might have a clear idea about what comes next, but for others, perhaps the next steps are less sure. Sometimes it feels like those around us already have a grand plan for success. But if you don't know where you want to go just yet, don't worry. Many of us don't, and some of us never do, yet we have achieved all kinds of successes.

In fact, the destination need not be specific, what really matters is the journey along the way. It is your journey at Melbourne, that has shaped you, and got you to your destination today, a graduate of this great university - the hard work and late nights, the friends you made, the parties you went to (or can't remember going to!), the shifts you had at work, the tutor that made you intellectually curious.

After I graduated, it took me a while to stop worrying about where I was going or where I would end up, and instead to start living and enjoying the journey. Once I did that, I found I was a lot happier in life, more engaged with the world around me, finding myself in more interesting and exciting places compared to those times when I was sitting fretting about where life might take me next.

I was reminded of this a few years ago when I was spending time with my parents. My father's memory was fading and he was becoming forgetful. But he recounted, as he did on so many occasions when the family were together, his favourite journey.

It was 1955, not long after India had gained independence from British rule, only 10 years after the end of the Second World War and shortly after my parents married. There was an expectation among their family and friends that they would settle down and do what everybody else did in the village, which was to get a job and start a family.

But this wasn't enough for my parents – they had an intense curiosity about the world. A curiosity that had been spurred on by their colonial education in India, studying Byron, Wordsworth and Shakespeare. And their school classrooms that had been decorated with images of the Swiss Alps and the Egyptian pyramids. The more they heard about the world beyond, the more they wanted to see it.

Settling for them meant giving in to someone else's vision of their life. Instead, they wanted to build their own story.

So they hatched a plan - to go to England, buy a car and drive it back to India, stopping off everywhere along the way. It was a rather far-fetched idea but they managed to borrow just enough money from family and friends to do the journey on a shoestring on the condition that they promised to return and get 'proper' jobs.

At this point, I want to stress that what I've just said doesn't give you all permission to go home this evening and ask your family to loan you money for a big trip to Europe, using me as your excuse!

Anyway, they took the steamer ship from India to England, travelled to London where they bought a second-hand Morris Oxford car and purchased a travel guide curiously called 'Britain: a book that attempts to do more than its size permits'. They had a budget of just \$8 a day for accommodation, petrol and food. They had no interest in purchasing souvenirs and shopping, but wanted to see as much of the world as they could. And they did. They travelled and travelled, around Britain, across to France, Belgium, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. Then to Egypt, Sudan, Kenya and on and on.

Recently when I found the log book of their trip, I saw how they rarely stuck to their planned route but made many detours - ever curious.

Such unplanned adventures would take them to rewarding places, but sometimes also present challenges to overcome. Once, they found themselves off track in Egypt and inadvertently entered into a militarised zone where they were aggressively pursued by Egyptian soldiers. Frightened, they didn't know what to do so my father whispered to my mother 'just smile'. So they sat in their little car looking up at the gun-wielding soldiers and they smiled, and smiled. Until one of the soldiers mistook my mother for a famous 1950s Indian actress called Nadira. Immediately, the soldiers smiling back dropped their guns, and began singing - and dancing - to the theme tune of one of Nadira's famous films that had been popular in Egypt. My parents joined in, relieved and happy to keep up the illusion.

This journey formed my parents, and the life-shaping decisions they went on to take. It showed them the rewards of experiencing different places, people and cultures, it taught them how to manoeuvre themselves with ease and with respect in different environments. And it gave them both the confidence to keep going on an incredible journey in life. Never too fixated on the destination, but always engaged with the journey.

The memories of that trip over 60 years ago stayed with my parents. And not all that long ago, I saw my father take my mother and start to sing, and dance, to the same song they had done with the Egyptian army. At that moment, I was again reminded that what matters is not

where we end up in life, but the journey we have along the way, and how it shapes us. And, that it pays to smile a lot!

Over the years, I have gradually been able to put aside my own fears about my own place in the world, of fitting in, of seeing success through the eyes of other people, of trying to please and impress others. I am enjoying every moment of the journey right now. I arrived at the University of Melbourne, where I have been so welcomed, on a six-month sabbatical, that was a year and a half ago!

If you too focus on the journey, I think you'll end up, having a rich and exciting life with wonderful family and friends. To write your own life story rather than live a version of someone else's.

Today is a day about celebrating your hard work, perseverance, commitment, and ultimately, your success. But let's not forget that everybody in this room has contributed to that success. So today is also about our families and friends, what they mean to us and their role in getting us where we are today.

We are all on a journey, and you are in an incredibly exciting place from which you could head off in so many different directions.

Congratulations to you all, I hope you have a magnificent journey through life.

Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

Today we are delighted to welcome as guest speaker Professor of Migration and Postcolonial Studies and former Director of the Global Development Institute at the University of Manchester, Uma Kothari. Professor Kothari's research focuses on global development and humanitarianism and, migration, refugees and diasporas. She is the founder and co-convenor of the Manchester Migration Lab, and to my delight is currently Vice-Chancellor's Fellow at the University of Melbourne. Her research has involved a number of funded projects, most recently an Australia Research Council project on International Volunteering and Cosmopolitanism, a Norwegian Research Council project on Perceptions of Climate Change and Migration, and an ESRC-DFID Development Frontiers project on Environmental Violence and Everyday Conflict. Her books include Participation: the new tyranny? (2001), Development Theory and Practice: critical perspectives (2001), and A Radical History of Development Studies (2005). Uma is a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences and was conferred the Royal Geographical Society's Busk Medal for her contributions to research in support of global development. It is a pleasure to call on her to speak today. Please welcome Professor Uma Kothari.