

**Occasional Address**  
**Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne, Saturday 28 July 5.30pm**

**Professor Cordelia Fine**  
*Professor, SHAPS, University of Melbourne*

Last week, I was scrabbling about in the shed looking for something that I didn't find. Instead, I came across a small raft made of empty milk bottles fastened together with duct tape. It had been patiently constructed many years ago by one of my children, with the long-term goal of bobbing his way across the Bass Strait to Hobart - just as soon as the family had consumed enough milk to allow for a comfortable journey. The raft, unfinished, was moved from my son's bedroom to the shed, not because my son had abandoned his gloriously wild dream, but because he had graduated to an actual boat that enjoys the recognition of the sailing authorities as a sea-worthy vessel.

My own childhood bedroom, thousands of miles and nearly as many years, from here and now, ended up crammed with the usual paraphernalia of adolescence, but most conspicuously books: fiction, feminism, psychology, zoology, ethics, including books by University of Melbourne Arts graduates Germaine Greer and Peter Singer, whose ideas provided new lenses on society and were no doubt part of the many influences that eventually brought me, many years later, to the School of Historical & Philosophical Studies.

The proud parents and family here today will probably also be able to bring to mind the idiosyncratic assemblage of bits, bobs and books, constructions and contraptions, markers and music, that they begged today's graduands to pick up off their bedroom floor, or to play with more *quietly*, and draw links with the course that those of you graduating today are charting.

Some of you will have clear ideas of the next destination, and others of you won't. But regardless, here is my one piece of advice. Find time to think about your purpose. By this I mean, what do you want to do with the knowledge you've gained and the skills you've learned? What contributions do you want to make to your profession, industry or society? What would you like to achieve, and learn? For what do you want to be remembered? So how do you find purpose – and why should you?

Rutgers University philosopher Ruth Chang advises us to see “hard choices” – this job or that one, this career path, or that – choices where there simply doesn't seem to be ‘a right answer’ – as important opportunities to create our own reasons for taking the path that we do.

Should your purpose be to build a great business that creates services or products that improve people's lives, fight for social justice, find and create paying audiences for the creative arts, challenge people through comedy? The world has no answer for which is the better alternative, so you need to create your own reasons to choose one rather than the other. To quote Chang: “hard choices are precious opportunities for us to celebrate what is special about the human condition, that the reasons that govern our choices as correct or incorrect sometimes run out, and it is here, in the space of hard choices, that we have the power to create reasons for ourselves to become the distinctive people that we are.”

When we do a strong sense of purpose, as many of you will know first-hand, it can help to keep us going through dull or difficult periods. But much more remarkably, evidence from social genomics – the study of how social and psychological factors influence gene expression and health – suggests that a strong sense of purpose can even serve as an antidote to some of the negative effects of stress, adversity or loneliness on gene activity. Purpose isn't just good for your career, but also for your health.

And it's also vital for organisations and institutions. There will quite likely be times in your professional lives when what happens at work or in your organisation conflicts with your ethical values. Industries, organisations and individuals place themselves in ethical peril when, individually or collectively, they lose sight of their purpose: whether it's a finance industry that forgets that its purpose is to provide financial products that serve the needs of the community rather than merely maximally profitable ones; a scientific discipline that loses sight of its purpose to produce reliable knowledge about nature rather than merely to produce high impact publications; or politicians who forget that their purpose is to serve society rather than themselves.

An explicit awareness of your purpose will, by guiding what you say and do in your professional practice, help to maintain a healthy ethical culture. And if that culture isn't so healthy, it may also serve you well. At any level in an organisation, speaking up is hard, and often risky, and a strong sense of purpose can be both a source of courage, and of counter-arguments to others.

I know all the parents and family in the room will recognise the waves of poignancy and pride I felt on finding that milk-bottle raft in the shed. Your graduation today marks a step change in achievement from your milk-bottle raft days. You are now sailing in a University of Melbourne vessel, recognised and valued as first class around the world.

Graduands – many congratulations. As a member of the Arts Faculty, it is a privilege to be part of the development of curiosity, discipline, character, knowledge, passions and skills that your parents and family began, and that has now culminated in the award of a bachelor, masters or doctoral degree. And it is our purpose to give society the gift of graduates with the attributes of academic distinction, active citizenship, integrity and self-awareness.

So please help us to achieve *our* purpose, by achieving yours. And then come back as alumni so that we can feel very proud of ourselves – and, of course, even more proud of all of you.

## Vice-Chancellor's Introduction

*Presiding Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen:*

*This evening, we are fortunate to welcome as occasional speaker an internationally renowned author and academic psychologist, Professor Cordelia Fine.*

*Cordelia is a Professor in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne.*

*She is a graduate of Oxford University, Cambridge University, and University College London, and author of several highly regarded books, including:*

- *Delusions of Gender: the real science behind sex differences, which was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Award for Non-Fiction, and*
- *Testosterone Rex: unmaking the myths of our gendered minds, which was praised in the New York Times as a "funny, spiky book [that] gives reason to hope that we've heard Testosterone Rex's last roar".*

*Cordelia has held research positions at Monash University, Australian National University and Macquarie University. She has been an ARC Future Fellow at the University of Melbourne.*

*She is also the recipient of the inaugural Women's Leadership Institute of Australia Research Fellowship.*

*Cordelia has been described in the Library Journal as "that rare academic who's also an excellent writer".*

*It's a pleasure to call on her to speak this evening. Please welcome Professor Cordelia Fine.*