

## Occasional Address

**Wilson Hall, University of Melbourne, Saturday 5 August 2017, 4.00pm**

**Naomi Simson**

*Founding director of RedBalloon, author, LinkedIn influencer, entrepreneur and businessperson*

The last time I was in Wilson Hall I was as you are now i suspect, feeling slightly pleased with myself that ‘I had made it’, in my cap and gown, all dressed up waiting for my moment on this stage to have my hard work formalised.

I had thought that my ‘lessons were done’, I was ‘cooked’, I was armed with my bachelor degree and the world was ready and waiting for my ‘brilliance’; life in fact has not been quite like that.

It has been many hundreds of sliding door moments - that in a second I need to choose which direction I will go.

Each of you will be in a different place, a different space; some will have jobs, some still looking, and some doing something contrary to what you thought you would be doing right now. Any place you are today is absolutely okay. It is a long ride - enjoy each phase.

I learned that it is not what happens to you, but what you create for yourself that will make the difference; how you respond to ‘what happened’ is key. It is the lessons that you garner from life's challenges that will give you resilience, determination and persistence.

Your north star might change, your definition of success will definitely move with time. Life's imperfections, the human foibles are what make for an interesting ride.

Life is not in the black or white - (and it is definitely not linear) - the exciting part of life is in the huge spectrum of grey.

There are lessons to be learned from each sliding door moment; from things you love doing, and things that you detest. You learn from those who lead well, equally you can learn from those who see the world differently... learn from the good and the bad.

I think back to my first experiences of how I was managed in my corporate roles.

As a young graduate with only a few years experience I found myself not only as the marketing manager for the business club for an airline, but part of the team working on the first frequent flyer program in the country. This was last century long before the time of the internet, smart phones and social media - it was leading edge, I felt lucky to be a part of it. I was working a 100 hours a week every week, month in month out, I was beginning to tire, and no one appeared to notice my contribution. I continued to work hard ‘hoping’ that at some point someone would notice that I was making a mark and offer to review my position and maybe considered me for a promotion.

Can I tell you ‘Hope’ is not a strategy.

I finally summoned the courage to go to my bosses, bosses office, upstairs to ask if this situation could be reviewed. I presented my case (with much trepidation) ‘please sir may I have more?’ only to have him bellow from across his large desk “how dare you come in here to my office and ask for a pay rise - how do I know what you do?” I was shattered and exhausted - my boss quietly suggested that I leave, he could see that I was close to tears. He stayed to negotiate what ended up being a \$5 per week pay rise rather than a promotion.

I was hurt, bewildered and ashamed to have been spoken to as if I was still a child. I felt so unjustly treated. As I got myself back together - I reflected on his words ‘how do I know what you do’... I thought to myself when I am ‘running the show’ I will know what my team members do, I will make sure there is transparency of contribution.

This experience forever changed me, not just as an employee, but also as a future employer. When I started my own business, I found my journey to leadership challenging, making many mistakes, saying the wrong thing, doing the wrong thing - but I always had the intention of being a great employer. It was not as easy as I thought it would be managing people.

In front of my bosses boss all those years ago I felt so small and insignificant, but the ‘lesson’ that he delivered that day meant that I went on to create a business that has been recognised as a best employer five times and developed a framework for other businesses to nurture individuals and teams.....

I was fortunate to have great role models.

My father started his own business from home, way back when I was studying my under graduate degree here. My mother worked in computing which was ground breaking if we consider she started in 1969 and for some of that long career she worked for entrepreneur Lyndsey Cattermole AM. I watched and observed I had great role models. I saw what was possible and that I could build my own enterprise. I also saw the challenges start up and smaller businesses face.

Ultimately I left corporate life at the ‘beginning of the commercialisation of the ‘internet’. I saw a way that I could tackle this challenge and support business owners on scale.

The hardest part about being in business is finding (and keeping) customers - and creating a thriving team; this sense of purpose drives me. Since I started my entrepreneurial journey in 2001, we have now delivered 3.8 million customers to other businesses.

I am often described as passionate: and passion is an energy. It is a feeling, it is your internal light.

But it is different to purpose.

Purpose on the other hand is how you contribute to others and make the world a slightly better place.

When you are driven by purpose what you do each day does not occur as 'work'. It becomes your calling - your cause. When you make a difference to others - you know you have made the world a better place.

It took me many years to discover my purpose. It took observing how I 'felt'. It took learning the hard lessons, listening for 'gold', relentless curiosity - and always asking 'why?'.

Ultimately my sense of accomplishment and contribution has come from knowing that I have the power to create my own future. As you do too.

I've had many setbacks, naysayers and critics - and sometimes things just don't go to plan. I pick myself up, dust myself off and remind myself of my motto - "If it is meant to be, it is up to me".

If you have an idea 'give it a crack', back yourself and never give up on being interested.

Stay curious - you are in charge of your life and how it occurs. You get to choose at those sliding door moments, look forward, don't look back - there is no perfect path - there is just your path. It is the way it was meant to be.

How you contribute to others will determine your sense of purpose, accomplishment and the experience of success. Happiness comes from what you give not what you get.

It is your time now, to flourish, thrive and prosper. Thank those who helped you get here, your parents, your family, your teachers through life. Take the gifts that you have been given, an intellect and ability to discover.

Leaders learn, the real game of life is the lessons that you collect along the way.

When you are faced with the choice at your many sliding door moments remember there are those in life who watch what happened, those who ask 'what happened?' and there are those who make things happen... Be the person that makes things happen.

## **Vice-Chancellor's Introduction**

*Presiding Chancellor, ladies and gentlemen:*

*This afternoon we are lucky to have as guest speaker a University of Melbourne graduate and high-profile businesswoman, Naomi Simson.*

*Among many distinctions, Naomi is Founding Director of RedBalloon, a leading online experience gift retailer, an investor and TV personality on Network Ten's The Shark Tank program, and a successful business blogger and author.*

*As many here will do today, Naomi graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce degree from Melbourne in 1984.*

*She worked in marketing roles for IBM, Apple, KPMG and Ansett Airlines, and started her own marketing consulting firm in 1996. In 2001 she founded RedBalloon, a pioneer in online e-commerce which has now served more than 3.8 million customers.*

*Naomi has received many awards including the Telstra Australian Business Innovation Award, and has a growing community of followers through [naomisimson.com](http://naomisimson.com).*

*She is also closely involved in philanthropic causes, including the Cerebral Palsy Alliance, Heads over Heels, which supports women entrepreneurs, and Voiceless, advancing animal protection.*

*We are grateful too that Naomi is an active member of the wider University of Melbourne community, joining the University's Business and Economics Faculty Board this year.*

*It's a great pleasure to invite her to address us this afternoon. Please welcome Naomi Simson.*