



Guest Speaker's Address

2021 Valedictory Dinner

Address by Dr Sallyanne Atkinson AO on 21 October 2021

Vice Chancellor, Madam President, Head of College, distinguished guests, but most of all our graduands and valedicts. It is to you I will be addressing my remarks tonight.

A valedictory dinner is an occasion for farewell, and I'm delighted and honoured to be part of yours.

You and I have much in common, apart from Womens College ... and my having had my own Valedictory Dinner in this room several months ago.

We are like bookends, those objects usually in wood or marble that are placed at either end of a row of books to keep them together. The books contain chapters of lives.

What we have in common is that we are at similar stages of our lives, in different ways.

You are at the end of the beginning. I am at the beginning of the end ... that sounds maudlin but it's realistic as I head towards my 80th birthday!

For both of us, for you and me, this is a time of unique choice. We can choose to be what we want and how. I do urge you to make those choices.

We are both at stages where we have no responsibilities or obligations. Of course, you do have obligations to your parents and families. And I do feel some responsibility towards my children and grandchildren.

But this may be the one time in your lives ... before careers and husbands and children and homes ... where you can do what you want, to be happy.

I don't mean be happy in the hedonistic sense but what gives you satisfaction, not following the edicts of your parents your peers.

This Valedictory Dinner is very different from all others (certainly from the 12 I have attended in as many years).

You will be the first post-COVID cohort to go out from this place. You will be going into a world that is often described as the *New Normal*, whatever that means. I think what we do know is that there is no normal.



We used to hear a lot about the importance of resilience. Now the important qualities are flexibility, adaptability, nimbleness.

We have learnt a lot in COVID and in many ways we should be grateful for that. We have learnt different ways of working and we have learned a lot about ourselves. Some people are better at working from home, others miss the stimulation of the office. The world of work will adapt to this in varying ways.

We will live in a world of uncertainty. It's always been a cliché that the only certainty is uncertainty, but recently that's been alarmingly true. How many happenings, how many functions have had to be cancelled and how difficult it has been to make any plans?

The world of work is changing all the time. When I left school our career options were very limited. Now there are careers that I didn't know even existed ... and most of you will have many jobs in your lifetime and over many more years. I have had at least 11 careers in my lifetime ... and earlier this year took on another, working for the Queensland Government on a Treaty with First Nations.

And I'm expecting to play a role in the Brisbane Olympics of 2032 ... though the actual date of the opening ceremony will be my 90th birthday. But the Olympics are not just about two weeks of sport at the end of July ... they're about art and culture and there's a long lead up time ... And work to be done on how we develop this city and the megalopolis that is South East Queensland.

The extra dimension now is that jobs can suddenly disappear. I was at my local Woolies recently, at the DIY checkout and the middle-aged lady who was helping recognised me and said I met you when I used to be a flight attendant and now I'm a checkout chick. Who would have thought? But she also said I'm still dealing with people ... and loving it.

You will have had the great and unique benefit of living in a university college and the lessons you have learnt here will give you great strength and confidence in the years ahead. You will have learnt about living with people, from diverse geographical backgrounds, of ages and interests.

You will have sat at tables in this room and had stimulating discussions on all kinds of things and will have learnt how to listen to other points of view with tolerance and respect. This will be particularly important in a world where freedom of speech seems to me to be increasingly under threat, and where simply a different point of view can give offence. The real benefit of a university education is to bring intelligence and open-mindedness to public debate when long held views should be challenged with intellectual rigour and integrity.

I don't think we can rely on the media to do that. As a former journalist, I wonder how the media will cope post-COVID when they have to find other news...



I feel it incumbent on me in this place and at this time to leave you with some of the lessons I have learnt over my life. I have always said to my children, and now my grandchildren, I give you my opinion and not my advice. If you give advice, you expect it to be taken. Opinions can just float on the air.

You will keep learning lots of lessons as you go through life. For example, working in France I got a whole new understanding of what it must be like coming to this country without English. When I went to Paris as the Senior Trade Commissioner, I thought I spoke reasonable French. But at a dinner party when people spoke across each other and all at once I was reduced to the conversational level of a 10-year-old.

And gender inequality was of course part of my career experience ... but too big a subject to tackle here, in the time allocated to me!

So here are some of my other learnings and opinions, in no particular order ... and which you might want to take as advice.

Seek out mentors and find role models. And do ask for advice older people are flattered to be asked. To share our experience validates our lives.

Be easy to get along with. Actor Roy Billings plays a "character" in every Australian movie or TV production, but was never going to be a leading man ... his advice to students at the Winton Outback Film Festival ... no matter how great an actor you are, you won't get work if you're hard to get on with.

Prepare for boredom. There will be many times when you just have to be bored, and it helps if you have a sort of cinema in your head, old memories that you can scroll back over, interesting philosophical thought. (Much better than your mobile phone.)

Accept discomfort. Taking risks involves being uncomfortable and is necessary for any great endeavour. Or even a small one.

Unleash curiosity and ask questions. I believe 'Why' is the most important word in the English language. And perhaps to be followed up by the most important verb 'To Think'.

And finally, I come back to where I started ... be happy. Socrates said 'Know Thyself' and Shakespeare had a variation of it in Hamlet, 'To Thine Ownself be True'. Decide for yourself how you define success and what nourishes your soul. Find a purpose that is right for you. This is the time to do it.

Tonight, we are saying goodbye. The French would say *au revoir* or see you again. Because Women's College will always be with you. I'm living proof of that!