

**ACCEPTANCE SPEECH BY SPEAKER OF PARLIAMENT MADAM HALIMAH YACOB  
2016 HONORARY DOCTOR OF LAWS RECIPIENT  
AT THE HONORARY DEGREE CONFERMENT CEREMONY  
THURSDAY, 7 JULY 2016, 11.00 AM  
AT THE UNIVERSITY CULTURAL CENTRE, NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE**

Your Excellency, Dr Tony Tan, President of the Republic of Singapore and Chancellor,  
National University of Singapore  
Professor Tan Chorh Chuan  
Distinguished Guests and Graduates

First, let me thank NUS and Professor Tan Chorh Chuan for conferring on me this honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. I am deeply honoured by it.

Next, let me offer my heartfelt congratulations to all graduates as well as their parents. You have done well and you and your parents have every reason to be proud and happy of your achievement.

As I look at your fresh and eager faces, it reminds me of myself on the day that I received my degree and graduated from the university. Of course, you are graduating at a much better time compared to me, as our country has progressed so much during the last 50 years. I don't have words of wisdom to share with you as to how you can navigate your own life and achieve whatever it is that you have set for yourself. Just don't be like Alice in Wonderland. In the book, when Alice reached a forked road, she could not decide which road to take, so she asked the grinning Cheshire Cat which road she should take and the Cat asked her where she wanted to go, to which she replied that she did not care so long as she got somewhere. So the Cheshire Cat replied that she could do that provided she walked long enough. But in order to go somewhere, seriously, you need a direction, a compass, if you will. But no directional signs will be there to walk with you. It's you who will have to walk all the nooks and crannies, taking in the rough-and-tumble that is life, before you reach your destination.

To me, life is about seeking balance, fulfilment and happiness. It is a huge white canvas and it is really up to us to fill it up, and I believe a life lived meaningfully is the most fulfilling. Sometimes, not everything can be planned but how you respond to the events that unfold in your life can make a huge difference. You can choose to be reactive or you can decide to take control and actually see them as opportunities to spur you on.

To be honest, I never expected to be standing here today to address you and to receive this honorary degree from my alma mater. For that matter, I never expected to enter politics and to become the Speaker of Parliament, not to mention the first female Speaker in Singapore. Some things in life, I learn, are unplanned but, once given the opportunity, you must strive to do your best. How you respond to these events and how you deal with adversities will make a difference. There is now a tendency to look at all adversities as setbacks and we try as much as possible to prevent and protect people from going through a rough patch in life. Without adversities in my own life, I could very well have been a completely different person. So, I

regret not the adversities in my life. They are the beacons that guided me, toughened me up and taught me the meaning of life.

Let me just touch on three points that are important to me.

My first principle in life is not to allow others or your circumstances to define you and what you can do with your life. I grew up poor, so I didn't have many options but I was determined to make something out of my life. I remember those days when I used to help my late mother sell food on a three-wheeled push-cart in front of the Singapore Polytechnic at Prince Edward Road, off Shenton Way. Growing up with no money and little time to study, no role models to emulate and no one to guide and advise me was really tough, but I saw the polytechnic students daily and that motivated me into thinking more deeply about the relevance of education. Getting an education was a huge goal for a poor and deprived kid, but I had to hang on to something, a hope, other than the daily drudgery of a difficult and exhausting life then, and I am grateful to have been given the opportunity to fulfil my hopes.

I am mighty glad, too, that I did not act on the advice of a teacher in my secondary school. I remember after I took my "O" level examinations, I was asked to see her as part of the school's career guidance and counselling effort. The well-meaning teacher gave me some very serious advice that, as a girl, I should take up a stenography course and learn typing and shorthand well. I was thinking to myself at that time, why should girls only be typists, stenographers and secretaries? Why can't we have other dreams and hopes? I decided then that being a female is not going to define me in what I do with my life. Neither should adversities. I remember attending the university's orientation programme with only five dollars in my pocket. I did not know where to get the money to pay for my fees or to pay for my other expenses. I was lucky that I later secured a bursary from the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore (MUIS), which I supplemented with income from part-time work.

Whether openly or silently, I have always rebelled against attempts to define women. Women in politics are not spared. Recently, a very high ranking female politician in another country was chided in an article written by a male who, unhappy with certain policies that she had articulated, labelled her views as "extreme" and "emotional" because she was unmarried. I did a double take when I read that article in the newspaper. It was unbelievable that we are living in the 21st century and women are still being spoken of as if we are still living in the Dark Ages. By all means disagree with her policies, if you wish to, but don't try to diminish her by trivialising her role because she is a woman. It happened in the Japanese Diet, or Parliament too. A female parliamentarian was speaking on work-life balance, when a male politician from a different party, told her that she should get married and have babies. He later apologised but it is indicative of deep-seated prejudices against women that unfortunately continue to prevail in many places. The lesson that I have learned is never to let anyone or anything define you as that means ceding your choices to others and limiting yourself.

My second point is about upholding the core values of this society. Without a strong foundation to hold us together, we will all crumble together. To me, one of the most enduring values of Singapore is building a fair, just and equal society. For this not to be just a slogan, but a living and breathing, albeit evolving, principle, we need everyone to be on board. You

have benefitted from a good education and will, in time, go on to hold positions of importance and influence, and this is where you can play your part. Always be fair and just in your dealings with people. Be guided by the common good, putting others before yourself. See beyond a person's exterior to focus on his or her real worth and capabilities.

I spent 33 years of my life in the labour movement where I met and worked with workers from all walks of life — from the night soil workers (who are now defunct) to professionals and managers. Regardless of their status, all of them had something to contribute and deserved to be treated fairly and equally. All of them had dreams of a better life for their children and that was the beauty of our society, where the son of a night soil worker could become a government scholar, where a daughter from a poor family could become the Speaker of Parliament. Will we continue to see this level of social mobility? It will be harder and harder as outcomes are now increasingly being defined by availability and access to resources which make a difference in a child's life. But it is something that we must hold on to tenaciously and do our utmost to uphold as it is this solidarity that is the glue that cements us together.

In my view, an important aspect of creating a fair, just and equal society is multiracialism, something that we talk about *ad nauseam* but which requires a lot more from us other than just wearing each other's costumes or eating each other's food, as our children do during Racial Harmony Days. Being diverse and inclusive requires us to truly understand, support and respect those with different cultures, languages and religions from us. At times, it also requires us to stand up for them if the need arises.

I grew up in Selegie House where I remember there was only a handful of Malay families living in the whole block of 15 storeys. The most telling moment was when the racial riots of the 1960s erupted and the clashes between Malays and Chinese caused deaths and injuries amidst the madness of racial hatred that prevailed then. Although my family lived in an overwhelmingly Chinese community, we never felt threatened or intimidated. We felt perfectly safe and comfortable during those very tense moments. A relationship of trust and respect had been built after many years of visiting each other, exchanging festive goodies and having conversations with each other along the common corridor. I am not sure whether such experiences can be replicated, but in today's climate of rising Islamophobia all over the world, the Muslims in our midst will really need their non-Muslim friends to stand up and speak up for them if ever there is a need. That, in my view, will be the litmus test of how far we have succeeded in our efforts to build a harmonious, multiracial society. As people with the education and holding positions of influence, you can make a difference in upholding multiracialism in the workplace and in our society. As a Muslim, I am not proud at all of all the evil and murderous things that people do in the name of Islam but neither their ideology nor their acts represent us.

Finally, I find it always good to take time to think and reflect on the meaning of life. My favourite book is Victor E Frankl's titled *Man's Search for Meaning*. Let me just quote from his book:

"Don't aim at success. The more you aim at it and make it a target, the more you are going to miss it. For success, like happiness, cannot be pursued; it must ensue, and it only does so as

the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than oneself. Happiness must happen, and the same holds for success: you have to let it happen by not caring about it. I want you to listen to what your conscience commands you to do and go on to carry it out to the best of your knowledge. Then you will live to see that in the long-run — in the long-run, I say! — success will follow you precisely because you had forgotten to think about it."

So, focus on your careers, make a mark in your chosen fields, but always remember to give back to society. Look for a cause, a passion and champion it. Also, remember that we are where we are today because we have the support of so many people along the way. A government that provides us with the opportunities for us to excel, parents or family members who sacrificed to give us an education, someone along the way that gave us a leg up, someone that we may not even be aware of. Let's have the humility to accept that not everything that happened to us was because of how smart or how good we are, but because we had a lot of help. I am standing here today because of the help of so many people: my family — when I entered the university, my brother, who did not earn much, gave me \$50 every month for four years, although I am sure that there were times that he needed the money so badly for himself. My mother, who passed away last year on polling day, who was a great help and inspiration to me. My husband, who stood painstakingly by my side in my career and political work. The teachers in my school who would pay for my school fees from their own pockets first because they had to close the account by the end of the month as collections were by cash then and I always paid my fees very late. The grassroots leaders and volunteers in my constituency who worked, and continue to work, with me to give others a better life.

On this note, I wish all of you all the best in your future and may you achieve happiness and success.

Thank you.