

**Speech by Professor Tan Chorh Chuan
President, National University of Singapore
at University Awards 2009, 24 April 2009
University Cultural Centre**

Unleashing The Potential Within

NUS Pro-Chancellor, Mr Ngiam Tong Dow
Chairman, NUS Board of Trustees, Mr Wong Ngit Liong
Members of the Board of Trustees
Award Recipients
Distinguished Guests
Colleagues, Alumni and Friends

Good evening.

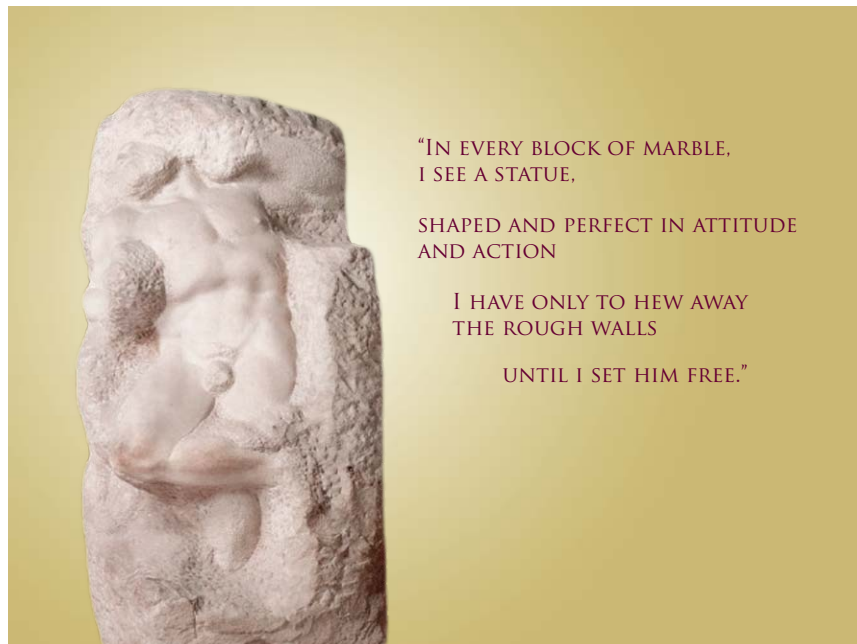
I would like to start tonight with a question.

If you look at the picture on the screen, what do you see?



Most of us would see a nice block of marble. But some among us would see beyond the stone, to the potential and possibilities hidden within it.

In my mind, the person who captured this idea best was the famous Florentine sculptor, Michelangelo. Michelangelo said “In every block of marble.... I see a statue shaped and perfect in attitude and action. I have only to hew away the rough walls...until I set him free.”



Note that Michelangelo did not say that he had a vision for a statue, and that he hacked away at the living rock until he achieved it. Instead, he said that he saw the perfect statue in the stone, and carved away the surrounding rock to unleash it, to set it free.

NUS, as an institution, needs to create the conditions that unleash the full energies and talents of every one of our students, faculty and staff, and allow them to be self-surpassing.

As a sculptor, Michelangelo was very particular about choosing the pieces of marble he would work on. At times, he picked blocks with apparent imperfections, which, in the finished work, enhanced the beauty of the piece.

At NUS, we too choose the students we admit to the University with care, looking out for those with special qualities and promise. But our students are not inert stones waiting to be shaped. Instead, they are bright young women and men, each embarking on a future full of possibilities.

As educators, our goal and responsibility is to help our students discover their latent talents and to unleash the potential hidden within. And to do this, we need to stretch them, to challenge them intellectually and to take them out of their comfort zone so that they can grow as individuals.

Last week, I was in Philadelphia and I took the opportunity to meet with 30 of our students at the NUS Overseas College there. Each of them was interning in a small start-up company. Over lunch, they told me about the various challenges they faced. Many of them had to choose the specific areas they would focus on and decide how to approach these. Some were involved in marketing research and sales, working with a range of companies. Others were involved in laboratory research, designing and carrying out experiments. It was hard and challenging work, but what impressed me about the group was their great enthusiasm, their confidence and independence, and above all, their obvious “can-do” spirit.



WITH NUS OVERSEAS COLLEGES BIO VALLEY STUDENTS

This week, back on our campus, we had great fun unveiling the new NUS Eco-Car.

A team of 10 NUS Engineering students worked for several months to plan and build the Eco-Car, a first for Singapore. The students worked closely with industry in the design phase last year, and the body of the car was fabricated in NUS in collaboration with our School of Design and Environment. The team and the car will soon be off to Germany to compete in the Shell Eco-marathon. The students told me that they faced some really tough problems, but they enjoyed themselves greatly. Building the car from scratch also forced them to learn more deeply about the basic engineering and science that underpinned the work.



I am really delighted that NUS is providing these students, and many others, the opportunity to unlock and hone qualities that will serve them well for a lifetime.

The same can be said of our faculty and staff. We are happy that NUS is attracting increasing numbers of highly talented individuals, who we select with great rigour and care. The environment and support in NUS for research and scholarship is getting better and better. Our faculty are tackling harder and harder research questions, which have the potential to unlock high-impact insights and discoveries.

On this, Michelangelo's words remain relevant even after the passage of over 500 years. He said:

“The greater danger for most of us lies not in setting our aim too high and falling short; but in setting our aim too low, and achieving our mark.”

At this year's University Awards, we honour 10 members of the NUS community who dared to aim high and who have exceeded their mark. They stand out for their passion, commitment and achievement, even amidst the large pool of talent that constitutes our NUS community. The award recipients come from diverse fields and differ in the nature of their contributions. But they share at least one commonality that binds them together.



Each of them has recognised the potential to produce real impact and value in their teaching, research or service, and in the people around them. Acting boldly and with passion, they have unleashed that potential. In the process, they have made important contributions to knowledge and innovation, and created an impact both within the University community and our larger society.

Tonight we acknowledge their achievements as individuals, but we also celebrate the collegiality and teamwork reflected in their work, which has helped enhance the impact of other members of the NUS community.

The NUS environment is already very vibrant. This evening, I would like to share two initiatives which I feel will further enhance the dynamism of our community.

First, the formation of the Teaching Academy.

The brainchild of Provost Tan Eng Chye, the Teaching Academy will draw on the very best teachers in our university to help drive NUS' education to new heights of excellence. We are setting the bar very high – the inaugural members of the Teaching Academy will comprise 18 faculty who are all previous recipients of the Outstanding Educator Award.



The Teaching Academy will consider questions of fundamental importance to teaching and learning, helping us to think about the future of education and how our University should shape its policies and directions.

For example, one of the first tasks of the Teaching Academy is the development of new educational thinking and initiatives in line with NUS' Global-Asia strategy. Members of the Teaching Academy will also play a critical role as mentors and role models for our younger academics. I envision that the Teaching Academy would inspire and nurture future generations of outstanding educators. It will enable NUS to continue to make great strides forward in educational quality and innovation.

Second, the launch of the Research Horizons Award.

We recognise that as we push for even higher levels of research excellence, more of our faculty will have to engage in "high risk, high impact" research. Such types of research often involve very novel and unconventional ideas which may not be supported by the usual funding sources. Details of this Award are available from the Office of the Deputy President for Research, headed by Professor Barry Halliwell.

The Research Horizons Award is meant to encourage more faculty to pursue lines of inquiry that may not predictably yield Tier 1 publications, but which have a greater potential to make exciting breakthroughs.

Only by breaking new ground, by defining or re-defining thinking in important fields, and by creating a positive impact on society, can NUS truly become a great university.



Like modern-day Michelangelos, we must continually seek to discover the true potential within our University, and work with passion and boldness to unleash it.

Inspired by the examples of our award recipients this evening, we must continue to build the spirit and culture of excellence in NUS, to make a deep and enduring impact.

And ultimately, it will be this spirit and culture that will energise the talented NUS community – a community that you and I are part of – to power our quest to become a leading global university centred in Asia.

Thank you.