

“Commencement Address at Oxford University”

Aung San Suu Kyi, 2012

Today, many strands of my life have come together. The years that I spent as a student at St Hugh's; the years I spent in Park Town as a wife and mother; the years I spent under house arrest - when my university, the University of Oxford, **stood up and spoke up for me.**

During the most difficult years I was upheld by memories of Oxford. These were among the most important inner resources that helped me to cope with all the challenges I had to face.

The memories were in fact very simple ones. Some are days like these, when I went on the Cherwell with friends in a punt, or sat reading on the lawn at St Hugh's, or in the library - not looking at a book, but out of the windows.

But these were very precious memories – because I had lived a happy life. And this made me understand so much better the young people of Burma – who wanted to live a happy life and who had never been given an opportunity to lead one.

When I see Oxford now, when I see the students of Oxford now, when I met some of them at St Hugh's yesterday, I saw myself again as a young student: carefree, happy, nice. We were nice, the students now are nice. They have been given a chance to be nice.

It's a very simple word, but it's an important one. When you look at their faces, you don't see any hidden agenda there. They were so open, as we were open – because we had been given a chance to be open. We were not afraid – there was no reason for us to be afraid – and this opened us to the world.

I remember small things. I remember so often going in a bus, with my very dear friend Ann Pasternak-Slater, sitting side by side, in a bus on the Banbury Road, our four denim-clad knees next to each other; and Ann looked down, and said: 'It's not fair, even knees are different.' And it was true. I'm not sure quite which way it was, but one set of knees was pointed, and one set of knees was round. These were the sort of things we noticed as students, and talked about, and built a whole philosophy on this little fact that we had different sets of knees, our knees were shaped differently.

The world was shaped differently. But we were not afraid of it. The differences meant that we were all the stronger. We learned how to cope with the different problems that we would have to face.

I have to mention one of my fellow honorands at this time, because when I was under house arrest I was also helped by the books of John le Carré. They were an escape - I won't call it an escape, they were a journey into the wider world. Not the wider world just of other countries, but of thoughts and ideas. And these were the journeys that made me feel that I was not really cut off from the rest of humankind. I was never alone, because there were many, many avenues to places far away from where I was.

And all this I was able to do to a great extent because of the years I spent at Oxford, the friends I made there.

The most important thing for me about Oxford was not what I learnt there in terms of set texts and set books we had to read, but in terms of a respect for the best in human civilisation.

And the best in human civilisation comes from all parts of the world. It is not limited to Oxford; it is not limited to Burma; it is not limited to any other country. But the fact that in Oxford I had learned to respect all that is the best in human civilisation helped me to cope with what was not quite the best.

Because what is not yet quite the best may still, one day, become the best; it may be improved. It gave me a confidence in humankind. It gave me a confidence in the innate wisdom of human beings – not given to all of us, but given to enough of us for the rest of the world to share, and to make use of it for others.

I have often thought that the saddest thing about Burma over the last few decades has been the lack of campus life for our university students. Campus life means a life in which young people can create their own world – or make the world their own. They have the freedom and the facilities to do so. Our young people in Burma have not had this freedom for the last few decades. University life has been shattered because of a perceived need to keep students in order. That's not possible: everybody knows that students can't be kept in order! So we shouldn't spend our time on such a futile and really undesirable mission. I would like to see university life restored to Burma in all its glory. And I would be so grateful if my old university, the University of Oxford, could help to bring this about once again.

I would like our young people to know what it is to feel that the world belongs to them and they belong to the world. To be able to stand at the threshold of full adulthood in full confidence that they will be able to do their best for the world and in the belief that the world also wants to do the best for them.

Oxford taught me to value humankind, because when I was in Oxford I was the only student from Burma. I think I was the only Burmese person resident in the university for the first couple of years. And all my friends were non-Burmese – of course English students, but students from all over the world, from Ghana, from India, from Thailand, from Sri Lanka, from all over the world.

And I never felt that they were different from me. We were all the same: we were all students of this university, which has some magic that makes us feel that nothing separates us - neither religion, nor race, nor nationality, nor even different levels of excellence in academic affairs.

Oxford is a place of tremendous broad-mindedness. Nobody discriminates against anybody else because he or she may be different, or may not have achieved as much as others. Every human being is expected to have a value and a dignity of her kind or his kind.

And that's why throughout the years when I was struggling for human rights in Burma I felt I was doing something of which my old university would have approved. And to feel the approval behind me has helped me a great deal.

Burma is at the beginning of a road. It is not the sort of road that you find in England: it is not smooth; it is not well-maintained; in fact, it is not yet there. It is a road that we will have to carve out for ourselves. This is a road that we will have to build as we go along.

Too many people are expecting too much from Burma at this moment. They think that the road where we are standing is like one of those highways on which I travelled from London to Oxford – and almost got carsick! – very straight and very smooth. Too smooth and too straight perhaps for me, because I not used to such smoothness.

But our road is one which is, as I said, one we have to build for ourselves, inch by difficult inch. And I hope that you will all be with us while we are doing this. I hope that you will understand that this road is there in our hearts and minds, but not actually there yet in real fact. And that we will need your help and the help of others all around the world to make sure that it leads to where we want our country to go.

And where do I want my country to go? My first trip abroad in 24 years but not really this one to Europe, but to Thailand, towards the end of May. And I stayed in a hotel called the Shangri-La. And I think every Oxonian, or most every, knows that in Lost Horizon Shangri-La was described as “something a little like Oxford”.

So where do we want to go to? Where I want to go to, where I want our people to go to, is a place which will enable them to see for themselves how wide open the world can be, and how to find our own place in the world - which is also open enough and wide enough for everybody to be included.

I would like a bit of Oxonian Shangri-la in Burma.

This is what I would like to work towards: very practical, because it's based on hard work, and knowledge, and modern research, and of course funding. We mustn't forget funding, which is a very important part of building any kind of successful institution these days. And I mention it because I would like all our friends, all our well-wishers, to remember that investing in Burma should be done with a sense of responsibility, and to remind those who are thinking of making use of the new opportunities that Burma is offering to remember that we, the people of Burma, need to benefit from these investments as much as investors themselves.

Please help us to make sure that all investments in Burma – business, development, humanitarian, all these in a sense are investments – that these investments are democracy-friendly and human rights-friendly. That these investments will help to promote in our country the kind of values for which you stand – the kind of values that you taught me.

Today has been a very moving day for me. Moving because I have found that the past is always there, it never goes away, but you can select what is best from the past to help you go forward to the future. In my college, my old college St Hugh's, I found that I could recognise every bit of it: even though there were very many new buildings, yet they had merged in with the old. It was such a harmonious picture of the old and the new standing together as a promise for the future.

I was very proud to be back in my old college, and warmed by the reception given to me and my team by the principal of the college and his family, and by the students. The warmth of the students was wonderful.

I felt that I was back again in my young student days. I didn't feel any different to them. And in a sense I am no different now to the young student who was at Oxford so many years before. But also I am different, because I've had to face different experiences.

But I bring all these experience back to me here at Oxford, and I find that Oxford is big enough and broad enough to contain my new experiences as well.

The road ahead, as I said, is not going to be easy. But Oxford, I know, expects the best of its own. And today, because they have recognised me as its very own, I am strengthened to go forward to give of my very best in meeting the new challenges that lie ahead.