

Notes for Honorary Doctorate ceremony 15 Dec 25

The past is all about us and within.
Haunted by tribal memories, I know
This little now, this accidental present
Is not the all of me, whose long making
Is so much of the past.

That is the opening stanza of the poem “The Past” by Oodgeroo Noonuccal. Sharing this poem is one way I pay respect today to Australia’s First Nations peoples. I acknowledge the traditional owners of this land we meet on, the Turrbal and Jagerra peoples, and their elders past and present.

I came across this poem in the weeks following the Referendum in 2023, as I reflected on the public debate on the Voice proposal. I use this poem because it reminds me of 2 things that I think are worth sharing with you as you celebrate your personal achievement and embark upon your career.

The first is about the choices ahead for you as a person of influence and privilege. Because this poem has a great backstory to guide you.

But for another woman, we would not be able to read Oodgeroo’s poetry. That other woman, Judith Wright, was a reader at Jacaranda Press, founded in an industrial suburb in Brisbane, to produce material by Australian writers, initially for Queensland schools but later for the whole Australian educational network.

In the face of opposition from her male colleagues, Judith Wright, then an emerging poet herself, successfully promoted the poetry of Kath Walker, as Oodgeroo was then known, and her volume of poems, *We are Going*, was published in 1964.

This was the first commercial publication of creative writing by an Aboriginal person. As a feminist, it pleases me that it was women who opened up that dialogue. This is a story of a woman recognising and valuing the contribution of another woman and promoting them in the face of indifference or opposition. We can read this poem because of collaboration, often identified as a female or soft skills style of leadership, but really just a sensible way to harness the best we all can, collectively, offer. This is worth reflecting on as you enter a workforce where you will have to make choices about how you will work for and with others.

The other reason I raise the poem is because it explains the significance of the past, to us here now in the present, and for our future. This is how Oodgeroo finishes her poem.

“Let no one tell me the past is wholly gone.
Now is so small a part of time, so small a part
Of all the race years that have moulded me.”

Do you understand how important your past has been for where you are in life now and what the future holds for you? Not just your personal past, but our collective past as a nation. We are beneficiaries or not of that past. For First Nations people, the legacy is a burden not an advantage.

What stuck with me after the Voice Referendum was our gross ignorance of our own history and its legacy. I include myself amongst the ignorant, something I continue to work on. I was embarrassed when our government shut down the Truth Telling and Healing Inquiry. Both by the decision to end the Inquiry and the disgraceful and disrespectful way the government treated its Chair.

For me, our past is too important to our future to deny it. I hope there will be other opportunities to address our ignorance, acknowledge the impact of the past and build a strong and harmonious future. But we live in timid times. We must give our leaders courage. You must be courageous and ambitious about this unfinished business.

Graduation is an important milestone. Celebrate, with those who helped you achieve what I expect was a hard earned degree.

And as you leave the cloistered environment of this University, step up, keep your eyes and ears open to that past that is all about us and within. Use your voice, whatever your personal and professional sphere of influence, to pursue a fair and inclusive future for all of us, built on honest respectful relationships. I wish you well.