

## GTF Degree Ceremony Address

It is the greatest of pleasures, and a distinct privilege, to be offered the opportunity to address you even briefly this morning. Firstly, I want to reiterate Dr John Moses' words of thanks for the exceptionally warm welcome and generous hospitality shown us by everyone at GTF. It has been a heart-warming experience. Secondly, I offer congratulations to those who are graduating today. Yours is a significant and praiseworthy achievement. Achieving a higher degree is in any event a cause for congratulation and celebration. In your case, having achieved it in the context of so many constant yet unpredictable professional and family demands, one can only raise one's hat in respectful admiration. Well done to each and every one of you. This ceremony is all about you graduates. You spend your careers ministering to others and celebrating their life events. For once, the person being celebrated is you. This is your life-event, so on this occasion sit back, enjoy it, and let others minister to you.

I feel an especial attachment to you all because I stand here as someone who has enjoyed many years working in the field of lifelong learning. I know better than most the trajectory that you have followed: the dawning ambition, the hopes, the disappointments, the fears, the triumphs. I also know the extent to which you have depended on the generosity and support of your endlessly patient family, colleagues and friends. I feel that each degree should come with an honourable mention in despatches for the support troops. It is perhaps trite to say this, but it must be acknowledged: you could not have done it without them.

Your President (I refer, of course, to Professor John Morgan) suggested that I might say something about the history of lifelong learning within my own university, the University of Oxford. And who am I to refuse a President?!

My own university, Oxford, was a pioneer of the University Extension Movement. That movement grew out of the liberalisation of Oxford in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as the University gradually opened itself to religious nonconformists, to poorer men, and at long last to women. It might surprise you to learn that from 1581 until 1855 anyone seeking admission to Oxford and Cambridge Universities (i.e. anyone seeking an English university education before the foundation of University College, London, in 1826) had to swear that they were members of the Church of England. The universities' doors were closed to Roman Catholics, to Jews, to Baptists, to Quakers and others. One begins to understand why so many members of those faiths opted for a new life across the Atlantic and sailed westwards. Religious tests were abolished in 1855, women were admitted from 1877. Making the University available to those who could not afford it was due in considerable measure to the University Extension Movement. In 1878 the Revd Arthur Johnson, later Chaplain of All Souls College, delivered the first Oxford Extension Lectures in the UK's second city, Birmingham. In present company it is perhaps worth noting the important role that reforming clerical academics played in this significant, and at the time startling, development. Beginning in the 1870s, when Oxford was already 800 years old, continuing education is therefore by Oxford standards almost brand-new, but it has nevertheless now been in existence long enough for acceptance even in that most venerable of institutions. It began as a series of extension lectures and summer schools at Oxford for non-traditional students, and it expanded into a whole system of classes and lectures delivered across the country by innovative tutors who developed new disciplines and ways of teaching. The movement is sometimes credited for taking Oxford to the masses. Lectures were given in town halls, public libraries and village school rooms across the country. We still have some of the original book boxes that tutors took with them around the country: heavy wooden cases which had started life as ammunition boxes in the First World War. Was there ever a better example of turning swords into ploughshares?

The aim of the extension movement was twofold: social and political. It aimed at educating the larger community in order to achieve a better-informed democracy. A hundred and thirty years on, the Department for Continuing Education flourishes, currently offering nearly 600 courses to 16,000 part-time students each year. It is one of the University's liveliest and

most exciting departments in terms of the range and ambitions of its educational programme. It is also at the forefront of national and international developments in adult and continuing education.

That is the background of my department, Continuing Education, and of my Oxford College, Kellogg College, which together keep alive the original mission of making the scholarship of the University accessible to wider, non-traditional, audiences. The college's name, Kellogg, derives from generous support in the early days from the W K Kellogg Foundation of Battle Creek, Michigan, an organisation whose quiet, unassuming and determined pursuit of social and educational betterment is in the very best Mid-Western tradition. Partly as a result of the Foundation's support we now offer courses ranging from weekend and weekly classes up to part-time doctorates. We cater for those who wish to study a subject out of general interest or for personal satisfaction, for members of professional groups or business organisations who wish to update their professional knowledge and skills, or for participants in our increasingly large number of courses for international groups. We have helped transform Oxford from a rather inward-looking institution. To give just one, humorous, example, it was until 1960 or so still possible to gain a place at Oxford on the strength of your prowess as an athlete (still the case, I gather, in some parts of the world!). There is a lovely story of the Principal of one college, at that time something of an athletic camp, reluctantly turning down a superb athlete with the comment 'Even we cannot accept a man who spells the name of Jesus with a small 'g'!' The University today is more mature, and much more meritocratic, and our adult students have played a part in that. Mature, self-evidently, but also emphatically there through their efforts and on merit.

Today more than ever, continuing education is not optional, it is essential. The modern workplace demands continuous improvement of skill and knowledge. Moreover, no-one believes any more – if they ever did – that personal development ends at the age of 18 or 21. I say that despite taking daily delight in the cartoon that hangs on my office wall. It shows two schoolboys dragging their reluctant feet through the school gate. One says to the other: 'Bad news. There's something called lifelong learning'.

I mention all this (I hope not at too great length) because it explains the link with GTF. Many of you, studying for GTF awards, have attended and, I hope, benefited from and enjoyed the Theology Summer School that my Department holds each year at Christ Church, one of the 38 colleges that make up Oxford University. The link is a natural one because both GTF and my Department are devoted to continuing professional education, and we like to think that we are among the leaders in our field. GTF, for instance, is pioneering new and potentially significant ways of bringing together students and teachers so as to provide supervision on an individual basis.

There is more: I see a strong connexion between our work in lifelong learning and that of those of you engaged in the work of ministry. Both areas of activity derive from and seek to promote the human curiosity that seems to grow stronger in all of us as we progress through life. There is also the abiding passion for truth that I witness in so many of our students, combined with a desire and determination to improve the human experience. The development of the human being is central to those of us engaged in adult education, as it is to those of you called to the ministry.

I was reading recently the text of a speech made by a faculty member of Duke University at the graduation ceremony of a graduate Liberal Studies Programme last Fall. What Professor Thomas Brothers had to say on that occasion echoes what I and any of my colleagues frequently say on similar occasions, but it is felicitously expressed. I will offer a couple of examples:

'When students get to the point where they are able to present what they know to others, and actually act as teachers, then the full circle is drawn and gladness multiplies.' We experience 'a wonderful circle of learning and teaching, a steady and stimulating flow of

ideas'... 'It becomes a communal experience with rewards that far exceed any brought about through individual accomplishments.'

Is this communal, enabling, experience not also what you aim to achieve in your ministry? It seems to me that Professor Brothers is in a way describing the achievement of a state of grace. That, in a nutshell, is why I feel such a sense of affinity with you all. My work may be secular, and yours sacred, but it doesn't take much imagination to see how they overlap. We are all of us engaged in a remarkable process that attempts to combine the thrill of discovery with the satisfaction of understanding.

I want to conclude by appealing for your help. My college at Oxford is, as I have said, relatively new. It came into being in 1990 specifically to provide opportunities for the continuing education and professional development of mature and non-traditional students. We now have 500 students and have become the largest and one of the most international graduate colleges in Oxford. A true measure of our progress is indicated, bizarrely, in that infallible measure of consumer satisfaction, 'TripAdvisor.com'. We boast four out five rosettes and are ranked 39<sup>th</sup> out of 100 attractions in Oxford. We come just behind the Turf Tavern! The list of attractions is headed by 'Bill Spectre's Oxford Ghost Trail', with which, I fear we shall never compete. Being young and far too busy, we have not yet got around to creating a motto for ourselves. We did think that we had discovered the perfect text. It begins 'While we live, we learn'. Unfortunately, it goes on 'But we grow no wiser'. Any help (preferably less pointed) will be gratefully received. It is on a twin note, therefore, setting you a new task while at the same time offering you the warmest of congratulations on your achievements, that I will conclude this address.