

Evensong 1 June 2025  
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## “A frog before breakfast”....

In the best academic tradition, I will begin with committing a double plagiarism. I am quoting our wonderful former Murray Edwards President Dame Anne Lonsdale, who in her address to our Graduands at their final dinner in Cambridge, before they left to brave the world beyond our bubble, once quoted what was very likely an eighteenth-century French author: “He who swallowed a frog before breakfast, for him the day holds no terrors”. (It does sounds less revolting in French...).

Some of you have done your first exams in Cambridge this year (one frog down); others have gone through that ordeal twice (two frogs down); some of you are now facing leaving Cambridge’s bubble behind and venture into the ‘real world’ (not that Cambridge is not also the real world but a very different one from the world you are about to enter). That will be a world of finding and securing jobs, accommodation, getting used to new environments, new rhythms, leaving behind old friends (although hopefully taking some with you into your new life), and of course, encountering, trying out, and securing new friendships and relationships, maybe entering marriage and starting a family.

Many more frogs to be swallowed but remember, Cambridge made you down some large ones and you felt the better for it!

And I’m sure you also remember what changes you made when you left school and secured a place here and what an avalanche of new impressions, people, venues, rules and regulations, new terminologies you then encountered. And you weathered it, even though, am I right, you felt like an impostor (Should I really be here? Everybody seems cleverer, more knowledgeable, more able to navigate in this new environment than I...)?

Apart from all the daunting new things, I hope you also discovered how to spread your wings, that there were countless opportunities for embracing new things (and people).

And that last item, encountering new people, brings me to the core of my small talk this afternoon. Human beings are basically tribal and wherever we are on the scale of being introvert and solitary or extrovert and gregarious, we still exist in a context and, as far as is in our power, shape that context to answer our needs, create our ‘nest’ to feel comfortable.

Think of that little litany of encountering someone in this university: “Hallo, what are you doing here? Which is your College, your department... oh, do you know so-and-so?”

And here we are this afternoon, we belong to Inter Alios and, if Ewan had his way, we would all fit into a boat...When we sing together, we try to create a harmonious whole (in a boat, we’d have to row together or at least balance ourselves lest we lose someone

overboard). A satisfying supervision or a meeting is one in which everyone is given an opportunity to voice opinions, in which people really listen to each other and no-one is made to feel awkward.

We are all part of communities, here in Cambridge these frequently overlap, but we are also part of 'outside' ones, family, friends, organisations to which we belong. In your future life outside Cambridge, the one some of you will enter soon, you will seek and find, new communities. You may have to adapt to very unfamiliar environments or perhaps re-enter ones that were familiar and find these somewhat changed. Or you have changed.... Neither friends, nor families, nor landscapes or countries, are set in aspic: life *is* change. That can be exhilarating and daunting, enhancing and difficult.

Some of us are blessed with stable contexts in the shape of family or friends, some of us are confronted with having to create, by ourselves, a new context and community. We live in a deeply divided country, and, if I may permit myself, as an original foreigner, to voice an outside opinion, I would observe that in the last fifty years the divisions in this country have become immeasurably greater. Or perhaps I should say that the divisions have shifted. When I came to this country, I was struck very forcibly by the glaring class divisions and what that meant in terms of, for instance, educational possibilities.

However, unless you were a victim of the cruel weeding out by the eleven-plus exam, which seemed to determine forever which professional trajectory you could follow, it was still very possible for children of not well-educated and/or poorer families to have the chance to widen their horizons, to aspire to a better (or at least better-paid) or healthier, life than their parents. Even in your primary school you might have been enabled to sing, to learn to play an instrument, to learn a bit of a new language, often French. If you were lucky to be educated further at a good Grammar or state school, all sorts of new opportunities in sport, music, drama or in other forms of widening your horizon, could come your way. I remember a guest in College telling me how he grew up in a small village in Norfolk with parents who had had no opportunities to learn, or earn, better. But his primary school had instruments that could be borrowed and his secondary school send him on an exchange to France and he said: "That was the first time I had ever encountered a different culture, realised that people operated in entirely different languages and saw the immense potential of language learning." He went on to become a senior policy advisor in respect of languages for successive governments. I am not mentioning this as an example of material improvement (although it meant that as well) but as an example of getting horizon-widening, mind-broadening opportunities.

That upward mobility has been, alas, it seems to me, all but lost. And with it opportunities for many lives that could have been more fulfilling, healthier, hopefully happier. That is but one aspect of the divisions in our society which we see daily growing more extreme and which brings more and more distrust and disharmony. To some people it is given, through whatever happy conflagration of circumstances and factors, to make their own lives and that of the communities we live in, better. I often tell myself to hold on to what T.S. Eliot called "the fragments which I shore up against my ruin" and which for me consist of friends, of an awareness of the many, many individuals and groups, organisations local or nationwide, which try to make this country better, greener, fairer, healthier, and there are many examples of such achievements.

For fear of sounding utterly sanctimonious: we may not all be able to change the world for the better but if we try and “do what our hands find to do” we might achieve much.

For those of you who are about to leave this familiar context and step out into your new environments, I hope that you do so in the awareness that building a community around you, not one that identifies itself as being radically other, and therefore better, than others, but one that sustains you and in which you can give as much as receive, is of great importance. Such a community would hopefully always be open to others, remember Ewan’s composition of the canon “We have much more in common than that which divides us...”?

“No man is an island, entire of itself”, wrote one of my favourite poets, John Donne, in the seventeenth century, in one of his Meditations, and he went on “every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod be washed away by the sea, Europe is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend’s or of thine own were. Any man’s death diminishes me because I am involved with mankind....”

Donne was an Anglican preacher and Dean of St Paul’s Cathedral in London and many of his poems and his meditations are deeply concerned with his, and mankind’s, relationship with God. But even if you commit the audacity of detaching the following passage from its particular devotional context, you are still given a lesson in living and the importance of living with your fellow human beings that seems to me universal: “The church is catholic, universal, so are all her actions; all that she does, belongs to all. When she baptizes a child, that action concerns me; for that child is thereby connected to that body which is my head too, and ingrafted into that body whereof I am a member. And when she buries a man, that action concerns me, all mankind is of one author and is one volume; when one man dies, one chapter is not torn out of the book, but translated into a better language; and every chapter must be so translated. God employs several translators; some pieces are translated by age, some by sickness, some by war, some by justice; but God’s hand is in every translation and his hand shall bind up all our scattered leaves again for that library where every book shall lie open to one another.”

And with that thought of the essential and hopeful connections between people, I conclude my talk. Thank you for listening.