

Colin James's graduation address, Victoria University of Wellington, 16 May 2008

First, I register my parents' gift: the privilege of valuing learning, which gave me a rich start in life from modest circumstances. Next, I thank the many who have opened unimagined learning opportunities in my working life, particularly Sir Frank Holmes and Professor Gary Hawke here today. Third, I note my lucky stumble into journalism, a trade of constant learning. I am blessed beyond any of my distant student dreams.

When in those distant days I last took part in a graduation the eminent cabinet minister who gave the address likened the many students who questioned his government's commitment of troops to the Vietnam war to "fleas on a dog".

Within a quarter-century those fleas and others of their age had re-engineered the dog: a prolific vigour in the high and popular arts; a new energy in business; a restatement of history; a policy revolution; a redefinition of this society. By the time the fleas were passing into middle age, this place was at last fully, not just formally, independent. And the inhabitants of this place were learning that there were two cultures here and were starting to make room in the power structure and in daily custom.

Beware the flea. It might be a revolutionary, just mucking around in the fur, stinging and sucking, waiting its time.

The generation of the fleas was the first to be offered and to take up higher education in large numbers. That was a gift of prosperity, a prosperity denied its parents when young. For the first time ordinary folk from ordinary homes had abundant opportunity to learn to think, not just to do. That is the gift of a university to those who use it well.

Thinking is both a private and a public business. The private business is inquiry and insight and understanding, including understanding that much cannot be understood. You who have graduated can live deeper lives than you could otherwise. The public business of thinking is the adding of value to society. You who have graduated can make life better for those around you in ways you could not have otherwise.

The next quarter-century or so, your quarter-century, will be exciting and maybe liberating, frightening and maybe calamitous.

The marriage of nanoscience and bioscience has huge potential to enrich information and health. Solar energy might liberate us from oil and coal. The blazing technological advances of the late twentieth century may well look like a dull glow in the rear-view mirror of the mid-twenty-first.

So, too, the great bonfires of the twentieth century, the famines, diseases, despoliation and wars, might seem to have been a flicker if we fail the tasks of human organisation in water management, food supply, oil and minerals and climate. Technology has pushed us closer together and mass migration is mixing us up. But the closer we are the more we know how distant we are, the more connected we are the more vivid are the disconnections. A compelling need in this century, perhaps more acute than in any other, is to learn our common humanness.

What of this afterthought of a country, this Aotearoa, which many, perhaps most, of you will leave or leave behind to make your most in a world demanding talent and skill? What is here?

We have, here, distant from tyranny, space to think. If your business is mindwork, this is a safe and spacious place to do that. And the virtual world's instant connections can supply some of the face-to-face, over-a-coffee serendipity that sparks new ideas and opens new pathways.

And for those who choose this village nothing is possible and everything is possible. Nothing is possible if you have no aspiration or are timid. Everything is possible because in this small place chances are no one is already doing what you want to do. You can think across boundaries. This is the place of the excellent amateur.

And therein lies a special challenge: to gift to those for whom nothing is possible the necessary privilege of learning everything is possible, to restore the social mobility that makes capitalism work best. The fleas-on-a-dog generation did great work. It liberated, defined, made independent. It transformed our society and did so without a shot fired or a bridge blown up. But it also transformed the peaceable prosperity of its parents into a nervy affluence. It made us less equal. It privileged hope. It made "nothing is possible" the future for too many children and grandchildren. It dimmed their horizons. We all lose.

The fleas are too set in their ways after their revolution to think how to meet that challenge. Are you flea enough to meet it or will you flee?