

10 December 2014
Graduation Ceremony, University of Pretoria

Dear Vice Principle,
Dear Dean of Law, dear Head of School,
Dear Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen,

I feel very honored to speak here in front of this elite audience at such a festive occasion.

Last year, I had just arrived in South Africa, I was driving to this graduation ceremony, not knowing what to expect, in awe of Obama's speech on the radio at Nelson Mandela's Memorial Service, while it was pouring with rain. I learned that the rain was a good sign, that heaven had opened its doors widely. But I was a bit worried about my hair then.

The question that was constantly on my mind was: What now?
I told myself a new generation will take over, new ideas and bright people.
But somehow I didn't believe that. I wanted that old man back, his wisdom, his love, his respect, his humility. So, the question that was on my mind was: What now?

Well, and then I came here. I witnessed this graduation ceremony, learned about the people that conduct it, Prof Viljoen, Norman, Martin. I learned about the graduates from all over Africa, you guys, I learned about the learning environment, the practical application, the exposure to different cultures and content and countries – and I thought: Oh, THAT's it. That was the answer. That is what's happening now and what has been happening for the last 15 years.

I felt very relieved and hopeful.
...and I felt honored that DAAD has been part of a program that has made such an impact on the whole continent for the last 15 years. Think about how long that is and where you were 15 years ago. That is truly impressive.

I am the director of DAAD South Africa.
What DAAD is or stands for, is mostly still a big mystery. It stands for Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst or the German Academic Exchange Service.
DAAD is the largest scholarship organization in the world, supporting the international exchange of students and staff. We offer scholarships to study in South Africa, as some of those ladies and gentlemen might confirm.
We offer scholarships for degree programs in Germany, as well as short term research stays in Germany – amongst other programs.
Why? Because we think broadening one's horizon is crucial in a globalized world.

"Innovation is a state of mind", our federal Minister of Education and Research said, and Innovation takes place throughout the world. In an increasingly globalized Research and Development environment, international cooperation is paramount to success. That's what we advertise and that's why we work in education.

Mark Twain said, never let schooling interfere with your education. But he also said, life is too short to learn German. I guess he just wasn't blessed with the best teachers then.

In German we say: Those who have a school, have a home.
Think about what that means to you.

Now, those were my professional thoughts when I got this invitation from Martin to speak here today.

When I then read through that email again a second thought crossed my mind: What am I going to wear. And that is not only because I am a woman and women never have anything to wear. I was wondering what the occasion was: Is it an end or a beginning, or just another step on the way?

I am sure you all know the poem Footprints in the Sand by Mary Stevenson:

"One night I dreamed a dream.
As I was walking along the beach with my Lord.
Across the dark sky flashed scenes from my life.
For each scene, I noticed two sets of footprints in the sand,
One belonging to me and one to my Lord.
After the last scene of my life flashed before me,
I looked back at the footprints in the sand.
I noticed that at many times along the path of my life,
especially at the very lowest and saddest times,
there was only one set of footprints.
This really troubled me, so I asked the Lord about it.
"Lord, you said once I decided to follow you,
You'd walk with me all the way.
But I noticed that during the saddest and most troublesome times of my life,
there was only one set of footprints.
I don't understand why, when I needed You the most, You would leave me."
He whispered, "My precious child, I love you and will never leave you
Never, ever, during your trials and testings.
When you saw only one set of footprints,
It was then that I carried you."

I think you could have the same conversation with your family, your friends, your husband or wife. When looking back on your last year of university life, at times you'll only find one pair of footprints, because you wouldn't be here if it weren't for your friends who motivated you, who shared their notes and brought you coffee, who went for pizza with you when you just couldn't think straight anymore, and who accepted that you wore the same t-shirt for longer than necessary, because you just didn't find the time to wash.

You wouldn't be here if it weren't for your family who decided to let you go for the greater goal you chose, who probably very often wondered silently how you were doing, and about when you would finally come back. They also carried you for this past year.

So, this conversation makes the last year look like just another step on the way, a footprint in the sand.

And, sorry, because I am a literature person, I need to use another poem to make this graduation sound a bit more exciting.

It's Herman Hesse who wrote:

As every blossom fades
and all youth sinks into old age,
so every life's design, each flower of wisdom,
attains its prime and cannot last forever.
The heart must submit itself courageously
to life's call without a hint of grief,
A magic dwells in each beginning,
protecting us, telling us how to live.

A magic dwells in each beginning. Can you feel it?

Well, I can see it. In the sparkling of your eyes.
I can feel the energy in this room and I can sense the thoughtfulness and your passion. Go for that passion! Why?

I am going to tell you a story of someone you all know:
His dad wanted to become an artist – and everyone told him, that's too risky. How will you feed your family? How are you going to make a living?! Think long-term.
So, he took the secure long-term job... and got fired only three years later.
Suddenly, his family had to make sure they would survive, all together.
The lesson that is to be learned from this story is simple:
If you can fail at something you don't like,
You might as well fail at something you love.
And I bet the chances are a lot smaller you will.

But love is not enough!
I now John Lennon will disagree with me there, but love doesn't end wars, doesn't prevent violence and doesn't make a living. Love sometimes makes us blind, makes us forgive even though we shouldn't, makes us be silent in times that we should speak. Love is a good basis, and a very essential one. What we need is more than that.

What we need for a peaceful world, for a peaceful continent and for democracy is participation, rules and responsibility.

That might seem very German to you, but it comes from a German person, from a person I very much respect. It comes from our Foreign Minister who said that, a lawyer by profession, who spoke at the University of Witwatersrand only two weeks ago¹.
I think he is very right.

We need participation because peoples' voices need to be heard, in friendships, families and states. We need political, economic and social participation to improve the lives of every man and woman on the continent. I look at the history of Germany and South Africa, and I see it. I look at Burkina Faso and I see it. But it really needs to be seen on a big and small scale in everyday life, everyday life of every person.

We need rules. I know that's funny, when I as a German say that. What else am I supposed to say?! But it is surely more than a national preference. People need fair and clear rules to be able to trust one another, and to be able to trade. Only when the individual feels safe and minorities are protected, can countries and continents prosper.

And finally, take responsibility. For things that you do and that you don't do, for things that should be done and can be done. Know what you do and why, and stand behind all your actions. Only that will create a global citizen in a peaceful world.

But now... There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens. For me, it's time to be silent now. For you it's time to laugh and to dance, to celebrate and to be proud of yourselves, to share this precious moment with your family and friends and to look back at the incredible achievement you've accomplished. Rejoice and embrace this very special moment.

...and, as our chancellor would say: Get back to work tomorrow.
Congratulations, dear graduates. I wish you all the best!

¹ To read the full speech, check:

http://www.wits.ac.za/newsroom/newsitems/201411/25243/news_item_25243.html