

Feature Address for
SAGHS Graduation Ceremony

Thursday, 20 October 2005

Angela Cropper
(10-15 minutes)

Mr. Chairman, Her Excellency Mrs. Hassanali, Former Principal, Graduating Students, Principal and Vice-Principal, School Chaplain, Representative of the Ministry of Education, General Secretary of Synod, Other members on the podium, Teachers, Other students, Proud parents, Distinguished guests, Ladies and gentlemen:

Good morning.

I am honoured to have been selected by this graduating class to deliver the Feature Address at today's graduation exercise. And I thank the Principal and Staff for their invitation to do so.

Permit me to begin by recognizing the impressive performance of this graduating class in the recent examinations, including a long list of national scholarship winners, as well as the many extra-curricular achievements being celebrated today. You, graduating students, have made your contribution to the longstanding reputation of this School for excellence. Your parents must be bursting with pride. You have no doubt brought much gratification to your teachers and Principal. You will have set a threshold of performance for emulation by the next cohort of students. And no doubt at a personal level each of you will be experiencing a high degree of satisfaction with the outcome of this phase of your educational

preparation. I heartily congratulate you and I am pleased to share in this moment. In addition to being bright, you are beautiful and graceful.

Ladies and gentlemen, forgive me if I address directly, perhaps exclusively, the graduating class.

You have been prepared to take your place as mature, adult contributing citizens of this society. For education is meant to prepare us not just for pursuing a designated career path, for obtaining a rewarding and satisfying job, or for assuring our ability to live a comfortable life, free from want and full of material well-being. Our education is also intended to prepare us for taking our place in society, for contributing to its progress, and thereby helping to evolve the quality of society that we wish to have, and to contribute to the character of the world civilization of which we in Trinidad and Tobago, though a mere village of a place, are a part. If I were wearing today a T-shirt of The Cropper Foundation, you will have noted it would say “Life is about more than personal advantage”. It is a maxim that my colleagues and I feel aptly captures the essence of what motivates us, and what we strive to manifest, and it is a maxim that I wish to leave with you this morning”: “life is about more than personal advantage”.

I emphasise these other purposes of education because they are often overlooked at the early stages of the educational process. This is because there are so many pressures on us to perform, to compete, to be outstanding, as the foundation for ensuring future individual progress and personal security. These pressures come from parents, from peers, dare I say from teachers and Principals - they are just

part and parcel of the education system and of the society as a whole. There is nothing in my view undesirable about those pressures, as long as they are balanced with a proportional emphasis about the other purposes of education, and the need to cultivate the seeds of other aspects of a person's mission in life. Your Principal this morning spoke about the tradition of 'Education for Life' in this school. I know from speaking with your Principal that this School seeks to make that balance. I also know from having been present with you at the end of June this year for your Forum on Crime that you, as students, take an interest in the issues that confront and preoccupy the wider society of which you are a part. So I think that you are well on the way to finding that balance. And this morning I would like to add just a little to that side of the equation by emphasizing to you the importance of those other aspects: of personal physical health and fitness, of family and community connections, of social consciousness, of civic commitment, of global awareness.

For however accomplished we become through our chosen jobs and careers, ultimately we rely on those connections for our personal and social satisfaction. There are different levels of personal satisfaction to which a person might aspire: We know well the concept of "a good life", associated with being well-off in a material way, associated with sensual pleasures, eating good food, enjoying hanging out with friends, being in the latest fashion, etc.; sometimes this is overlaid with doing something in which we are talented, and enjoying doing that. Then there is the concept of "the meaningful life" associated with being involved in something

which has a larger purpose than self-satisfaction, though this orientation can also generate a great sense of fulfillment.

Today, in Trinidad and Tobago, it is perhaps more incumbent on you, the young generation, to demonstrate the other purposes of education, to find a balance in the activities which you pursue, and to choose the orientation of your life and the nature of fulfillment that you seek. Because we live in a society where each one seems to be for herself, where families are falling apart, communities – low and high income ones - have become mere housing estates, individuals are alienated, and the social, political and cultural fabric of the place is in shreds. Today in this society we emphasise the ‘me’ with little regard for the ‘other’, the ‘personal’ to the exclusion of the ‘civic’, the ‘material’ at the expense of the ‘spiritual’, the ‘now’ at the expense of the ‘future’. We seem to have lost the duty of caring. We, the older generation, have made it so. When I was here with you for your Forum on Crime, I said to you that it pained me to recognize that we were bequeathing to you a society in shambles, that is in considerable need of repair and refurbishment. That burden now falls on you, as part of the up-and-coming generation of scholars, professionals, thinkers, doers, activists, ethicists, and advocates. It is a very heavy burden. And you therefore need to equip yourself for taking on that responsibility. Your Chaplain spoke this morning about the ‘bewildering world which you face, but a world full of inspiration and challenge’. But you will need to seek that inspiration and face up to the challenges.

To do so – to equip yourself for transacting in this world - you need to consciously and systematically develop the ways in which you would relate to the other purposes of education. At this juncture in your educational process, there will be pressures on you to decide on ‘what you want to be’ – that is, what career path you will choose, what degree you will pursue, which university you will seek to attend, etc. But equally, you need to decide ‘how’ you want to be: that is,

what are the principles that will guide you in life, whatever the chosen job or career;

what are the professional characteristics that you want to be noted for when you are spoken about by your colleagues and the wider society;

what is the balance you will seek between self and society, between personal advantage and social contribution, between your well-being and that of your progeny.

I mention your progeny because surely you would not want to be at the end of your professional life regretting the quality of society that you will bequeath to your children and theirs, or wondering whether you will have left them enough of a resource base to sustain their well-being.

As young people moving on from this phase of your education, you have many advantages at your disposal: instant communications, many technologies available to the individual, easy mobility, myriad opportunities to explore and enjoy your own physical space, opportunity to travel abroad and connect with other peoples.

Certainly far more advantages compared to when I was at your stage of graduating

from High School! Paradoxically, these advantages seem to lead many young people today to become self-absorbed: we can study with the computer instead of with peers in a study group; we can communicate with friends through the ubiquitous cell phone; we can even shop on-line and avoid the market place; this is balanced by using the malls as liming spots. These patterns of engagement do not augur well for our future, which depends so much on regaining family, community and social solidarity, and on sustaining those connections.

You, graduates of today, are fortunate to have had the opportunity to grow up in a school context that has sought to expand your outlook beyond self. You have the choice now to build on that foundation and consciously seek to sustain that nurturing. I say ‘consciously’ because these are choices that will confront you. In preparing yourself to make choices and to find a balance in your life among the various purposes of education, it will be vital that you identify the principles which ground and guide you.

One of those that I have tried to use to guide me in making choices came to me while I was at High School. Of course this is going back in history! But I would like to share that with you in the hope that it might help you in your process of identifying the principles on which you would rely.

My mother could not afford to buy me most of the text books my school required, in those days text books were not subsidized, so I often could not do the assigned homework. As a result I was a frequent visitor to the school detention centre. As it

happened the school library doubled as the detention centre where a detainee would be required to 'write the lines', which constituted the form of punishment of the time. I'm talking about almost half a century ago, so I don't expect any of you young people to know what 'writing the lines' means. I learnt from your Principal this morning that detention is no longer practised in schools. In detention, a student would be given a sentence to write out about 100 times or so, presumably in the hope that that would correct the aberration for which she was being punished. In those days students were required to be respectful of authority generally, and particularly the authority of their teachers, so I did not question how the repetitious writing of a sentence like 'I promise to be a good student and do my homework at all costs' would overcome our poverty and acquire the text books that I needed. Anyway in the library one also had access to the text books so the homework could then be done while in detention. But doing detention in the library offered an expanded opportunity for accessing the books in the library.

One of the books I read during these times was *Antigone*, by the Greek playwright Sophocles. I remember the great impression that that book had on me, and it is something which I have carried with me all my life. Antigone is a story about making difficult choices. King Creon of Thebes had ordered that the body of Antigone's brother Polyneices be left unattended and unburied as punishment for his defiance, and Creon ruled that anyone who contravened that order would be put to death by being stoned by the people of the city. After much reflection, Antigone, in defiance of the King's order, ministered to her brother and buried his corpse, and

duly suffered the consequences. But in so doing she elevated Theban society. She had chosen to do what she considered to be her higher duty: a duty of care; a duty of compassion, above her duty to the King's law. It is a powerful play. And a very compelling principle. If you have not read it, I strongly recommend that you do. Since then the principle of duty has been foremost among the principles that I consciously use to guide me in the positions that I take and the decisions that I make. When I am in a tight spot and I have to make a decision, I begin by asking what is my duty here? And it was instilled from my time in High School.

I tell you that story because as you go forward in your professional life you will have positions to take and choices to make that will not be straightforward. In your engagement with your peers, with the community and world around, you will have to choose whether to focus exclusively on self and career or whether to balance that with contributing also to the common good; you will have to choose whether your generation will restore that human touch that seems to have disappeared from us and our society. You will have to choose whether to try to refurbish qualities of caring, of compassion, of sharing, of hospitality, of civic-mindedness – attitudes that contribute to real quality of life. You will have to choose whether you contribute to the rescue of this place called Trinidad and Tobago, or whether you will pack your bags and go. These are choices you will have to make in finding a balance between self and society. And they will be hard choices. So it would serve you in good stead to have clarity about the principles that ground and guide you. It is not too early to begin that process.

My congratulations once again to students and School, and my very best wishes to the graduating students for continued excellence in their chosen pathways. And, most important, may you find peace in whatever you choose to do.

Thank you.

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20 Oct 2005