

Response to the Laureate Address on the occasion of receiving the Honorary Doctor of Education degree, University of Edinburgh, 14 July 2005

My life story is unspectacular, similar to that of many black South Africans who lived through apartheid—a story of dispossession and humiliation, and a reluctant product of what we called ‘gutter education.’ I did not know anyone in my community who went to university; my parents did not finish high school, nor were they expected to. I was stuck in the first grades of high school, finishing last in most subjects and spending a term in the officially named *retarded class*.

My aim in life was to sell a parasite-infested fish called snoek, an after-school experience I enjoyed—manipulating the price to white people as I sold this glittering fish off the back of the Solomon’s family bakkie (pickup) on prominent street corners in Cape Town. My other aim in life was to play soccer, but then my Latin teacher interrupted a soccer game during the school interval to tell me I had *potential*. As soon as my mother returned from her nursing duties at Princess Alice Orthopedic Hospital, I asked her what this thing called ‘potential’ meant. Her answer was memorable: “it means, son, you do not have to play soccer for the rest of my life.” That experience changed my life, and is probably the reason I eventually became a teacher—I wanted to be like Mr Galant.

But the road ahead remained tough. I dropped out of university and failed my first year in part because of the relentless racism of my science professors; the under-preparedness of my school education; the difficulties of raising funds to travel daily to my racially designated university far from my home; and the turbulence of student resistance in 1976-77.

If you had told me at that time of great struggle and disillusionment that I would one day receive an honorary degree from this renowned institution, I would have responded that you had a much greater chance of catching the Loch Ness Monster.

And yet here I am today, joining the illustrious alumni of this great University—among whom I count my favourite philosopher David Hume, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson, and (I am told) the next Prime Minister, Gordon Brown. But I am especially pleased to be able to join two distinguished *African* alumni—Mwalimu Julius Nyerere, the first president of an independent Tanzania; and your own Professor Kenneth King, one widely regarded as the most accomplished scholar of vocational education, training and skills development in post-colonial Africa. What a privilege!

I cannot however let this moment slip without a more direct message to the graduates.

Where and when I grew up, there was a clear sense in the black community that the education you received was a gift through which to serve others. It was not, I learnt early on, for personal consumption but for community service; it was not for self-aggrandisement but for self-reliance. There was a common agricultural metaphor applied at the time to those who finished school or university: you were expected to 'plough back' into your community.

It is not necessary for me to remind you that in recent weeks Scotland became the global focal point for redressing poverty and inequality in Africa—from Live 8 (and the local version at Murray Park) to the G8 at Gleneagles. It is in this context that I cannot but challenge you, as you receive the honour of a University of Edinburgh degree, with this question:

“What do *you* think your education really is for?”

As you step out today I further remind you that the developmental links between South Africa and Scotland reach far back in time. One example is Lovedale College, established by Scottish educators--- a school that became the training ground for major African leaders and presidents, including our current head of state, Mr Thabo Mbeki. I urge you to come back to Africa (or anywhere in the developing world), but this time come not as missionaries but as partners in African development.

I conclude by thanking those who made this event possible. My beautiful wife Grace and my incredible children, Mikhail and Sara-Jane. I am also delighted to have in the audience, as my guests, two best friends—Neil and Patience Dreyer. When I was in high school, I had a crush on Patience but then she ran off and married my best friend. But as they say in these parts, Neil, “you could have done worse!”

Neil finished his dentistry degree before me, and I remember on the dusty streets of Cape Town how he reached into his first 'pay packet' and gave me R20 (twenty South African rands) with these words: “spend it wisely.” Neil, I wish to return your R20 today and I hope I have convinced you that I spent it wisely.

Well, that's it.

I still can't believe this is happening.

Pinch me someone.

I am feeling lucky—so lucky, in fact, that I will be traveling north immediately after this ceremony. Maybe, just maybe, that bloody monster exists after all!

Many thanks.