

Sri Sharada Institute of Indian Management-Research

Gyan Diksha Samaroh Commencement Ceremony of 22<sup>nd</sup> Academic Session

Guest of Honour Commencement Ceremony Address, 2<sup>nd</sup> September 2017

Prof. Colin Coulson-Thomas\*

Chancellor,

I bring greetings and best wishes for His Holiness your 36<sup>th</sup> Pontiff and to all members of your Order, distinguished guests and the Sri Sharada Institute community.

I bring them from HE Don Carlos Gereda y de Borbon, Marques de Almazan, and the late 49<sup>th</sup> Grand Master of The Military and Hospitaller Order of Saint Lazarus of Jerusalem.

I also bring them from India's Institute of Directors.

In many higher education institutions so called “safe spaces” are being established. Their ostensible purpose is to protect students from opinions and views they might find unwelcome, unacceptable or distressing.

One has to respect the wishes of people without overly insulating them from realities that sooner or later they are likely to encounter and will need to confront.

There are few, if any, safe spaces from certain challenges. We face threats from drug resistant viruses to terrorism. There are issues such as global warming, climate change and sustainability to address.

Advances in automation, artificial intelligence, robotics, disruptive technologies and the sharing economy threaten our employment and job prospects. They raise questions about what it is to be human and who or what you may be competing with in your lifetimes.

India faces multiple challenges. Like the extreme poverty that affects hundreds of millions, they seem always to be with us.

When the founders of major religions were among us there were “outsiders”. They included people whom others referred to as lepers.

As great leaders, thinkers, artists and scientists have come and gone, those afflicted with leprosy have been ever present. They have been excluded socially and economically for over two millennia. They have been ostracised, rejected by their families and communities, ejected from towns and villages, and sent to leper colonies.

India accounts for some 60% of new cases that are diagnosed. Some two million people live in India with long-term effects of the disease.

Leprosy is a curable condition. It can be treated. Like other challenges it represents an opportunity.

Today there are probably more opportunities to have an impact and make a difference than at any time in history. There are many “outsiders” we can reach, engage and embrace.

We need to understand the scale of the economic, social and environmental challenges we face and the extent of the opportunities they create to realise how precious, special and needed all of you are.

Social entrepreneurs - reformers - innovation in areas such as basic sanitation - digital developments that reach rural areas - more inclusive corporate policies – the Bridges of Sports initiative - the creative arts. All of these, and all of you, have opportunities to reach, bring hope and deliver benefits to excluded communities.

The challenge for many concerned individuals and caring companies is how to widen access and improve the lot of the disadvantaged, while still looking after one's own and stakeholder interests and remaining current and competitive.

Our inherited instincts and much of what we learn at a young age - whether from those around us or from those who have gone before - are concerned with ensuring our individual and collective survival.

Most of human history has been a struggle for survival. Success has often gone to the ambitious, the assertive and to the strong and the smart. They have often prospered at the expense of the content, the submissive and the weak, simple and naively good.

At times, arrogance and wealth seem to offer more visible rewards than modesty and wisdom. Yet as John Henry Newman pointed out virtue can be its own reward.

Wherever and whenever people have a choice they tend to favour associates, companions and suppliers who understand their aspirations and are competent, honest and can be depended upon.

Legitimacy and trust are particularly important today. Evidence of immoral or irresponsible conduct can be quickly captured on a mobile device and uploaded with the potential to go viral.

People and organisations should aim high. It is not easy to achieve more than you set out to do, or to become more than what you aspire to be.

Personal qualities can be developed, recognised and rewarded because they are regarded as acceptable, or worthy, or because they lead to success.

From whose perspective should we look at success - from the perspective of an employer, an entrepreneur or individuals seeking to do well for themselves and/or for those they aspire to help.?

Success can be measured relative to our aspirations and what could or should be, and relative to our individual and collective potential.

Attributes considered positive - and behaviours sought - tend to be those that appear to work.

We can learn from own experience about what works and does not work. Sometimes this involves learning the hard way and experiencing disappointment, failure and pain. It makes sense to learn from the wisdom of others, particularly wise people who over the centuries and millennia have thought about what advice to give.

Ancient wisdom and past attempts to create shared values – and in some cases universal ones – have helped our ancestors to get us to where we are today.

Both Bernard of Chartres and Sir Isaac Newton acknowledged that they were able to move forward because they stood upon the shoulders of giants. Respect those who have gone before and have laboured to build the foundations of our civilisation.

Not everything that has been recorded has survived. Much has been lost, as when the great library at Alexandria burned. However, much has also been painstakingly passed from generation to generation.

The literature and domestic fragments that have survived, suggest human nature has not changed that much over the last few thousand years. When we see similar expressions of character all around us, it is a brave, arrogant and perhaps irresponsible person who ignores ancient wisdom or refuses to learn from it.

Threats and challenges have been an ever present feature of the human experience. Previous civilisations have been laid low by climate change, war and conquest, inadequate governance and failings of character and morality. Much of what ancient voices have to say can be relevant - indeed especially relevant - to us today.

At the same time, in all eras the unexpected can and often does arise. We need to be prepared for novel situations, new challenges and unanticipated events. Be inspired and motivated by ancient wisdom rather than constrained and limited by it.

To confront some challenges and seize certain opportunities we need to be creative, innovative and entrepreneurial. Traditional, learned and approved responses may not be sufficient, appropriate or effective. We also require the ability to assess, imagine and invent. We also need the courage to discover, explore and pioneer.

Certain challenges already affect the planet we share with other forms of life. Human activity has adverse consequences for us, other species and the environment.

Unless innovation and disruptive technologies provide viable alternatives, our future may depend upon the extent to which we change our priorities and adopt simpler, healthier and more sustainable and fulfilling lifestyles.

I will share what I have observed and learned. Its relevance may vary according to your aspirations, priorities, situation and circumstances.

Be balanced. Avoid being at the extremes.

Keep a sense of proportion. As Charles Handy said to us when we started at the London Business School, don't trip over the daises. He also advised against looking over your shoulders at others. Comparisons may not be relevant and can be misleading.

You don't have to be first at everything. I was last at Latin at school. The sum total of who and what you are, your aspirations, your motivations, who you associate with, and how you live your life will determine your impact in and upon this world.

Look for opportunities to contribute and to add value. There are many people drawing from the well of knowledge and civilisation and far too few replenishing the supply.

Be hopeful. Learn to live with uncertainty. In whatever situation you find yourself, tomorrow is another day. Life may not always seem fair to you, but you can still try to be fair to others.

Turn threats and challenges into inclusive opportunities. There are opportunities to ameliorate negative consequences, opportunities to help people to cope, and opportunities to develop alternatives and substitutes.

Do not pass up opportunities. Try to live your life today so that you will have few regrets in the future.

Don't be impatient or in too much of a hurry. At the same time don't procrastinate.

Use your time and that of others wisely. Use it to create outcomes, offerings and solutions that are better, unique, special or different.

Disruptive technologies, digital developments and greater connectivity break down barriers and open up new possibilities. We have more options in terms of where, when, how and with whom to work, learn, consume and share than any generation in history.

We also have more opportunities to lead, manage, help and support others. A business can become a cause. Dreams can become realistic goals.

Network across communities. Look beyond labels and symbols of race, religion and nationality at motivation, conduct and contribution.

Openness and a diversity of complementary talents and personalities within a group can stimulate creativity, enable innovation and support entrepreneurship.

Leadership and entrepreneurship are about thinking as well as doing. Many of you will become self employed and entrepreneurs. Rather than be a piece on someone else's chessboard, you will create your own games and build your own businesses.

Apparently, the most visited place on our planet is not a contemporary oracle, a seat of great learning or a world heritage site, but a shopping mall in Dubai. Many people search for things rather than for thoughts. Another reason why you are so precious.

Going with the flow and following the crowd can sometimes be fatal. Effective directors avoid groupthink and exercise independent judgement. They are also tolerant of others and try to understand their viewpoints.

Think for yourself, but - where appropriate - listen to informed counsel. Take objective, honest, balanced and relevant advice. Encourage people to discuss, critique and refine. Aims and outcomes are improved by questioning and challenge.

We don't want change for changes sake. We have to safeguard scarce natural capital. We need caution and prudence as well as energy and drive.

Focus. Concentrate. Less can be more.

Avoid distractions and avoid getting into debt.

Being dependent upon others or under obligation to them can limit independence of thought. It can prejudice the giving of objective and honest advice. Being forced by necessity to keep in with others can breed accommodation, flattery and groupthink.

Try to be inner directed and self-motivated. Just as you should not flatter or deceive others, so you should not be distracted by their attention, flattery and deceit.

Whatever recognition others give or do not give you - whether genuine or false - should not affect your opinion of yourself, if you have done your best to do what you believe to be right. If you avoid self-deception, you will know your motives, what you have done and what you have achieved.

Having a place you associate with or call home can give you an anchor and a foundation, somewhere to return to and recharge your batteries. For some of you, this institute and community could be such a place.

We cannot *claim* credit for being born smart. You will all *deserve* credit for making the best use of whatever capabilities you have inherited and/or develop. Use them to benefit yourself, your families, your communities, your country and the wider world.

Listen, learn and lead.

\*Prof. (Dr) Colin Coulson-Thomas has helped directors in over 40 countries to improve director, board and corporate performance. In addition to directorships he leads the International Governance Initiative of the Order of St Lazarus, is Director-General, IOD India, UK and Europe, chair of United Learning's Risk and Audit Committee, Chancellor and a Professorial Fellow at the School for the Creative Arts, Honorary Professor at the Aston India Foundation for Applied Research, a Distinguished Professor at the Sri Sharada Institute of Indian Management-Research and a member of the advisory boards of Bridges of Sports and the Arvind Foundation, and ACCA's Governance, Risk and Performance Global Forum. An experienced chairman of award winning companies and vision holder of successful transformation programmes, he is the author of over 60 books and reports. Colin has held public appointments at local, regional and national level and professorial appointments in Europe, North and South America, Africa, the Middle East, India and China. He was educated at the London School of Economics, London Business School, UNISA and the Universities of Aston, Chicago and Southern California. He is a fellow of seven chartered bodies and obtained first place prizes in the final exams of three professions.