

**ADDRESS GIVEN ON THE OCCASION OF GRADUATION
FROM THE HOWARD LEAGUE LITERACY PROGRAMME**

**Held at Rimutaka Prison
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Some of the earliest and happiest memories I have are of my mother reading to me. She read me fairy stories and legends and poetry and the magic has never left me. I am lucky to still have my mother. She is 91 and lives by herself and she is as sharp as a tack. My mother is also my most severe critic. Sometimes I think it is very good for a Chief Justice to have a mother to cut you down to size every now and then. Sometimes I really wish she would cut me a little more slack. So when I rang her last night and she asked what I was doing today, I was not quite sure what she would think. She was so happy when I told her what is happening here today and that is I think how all of us feel. I would like to reflect on why we are so happy.

My mother does not read any more because she has macular degeneration and is nearly blind. But she knows how precious the ability to read is. The men and women, the volunteers of the Howard League, who have tutored you, know how important this skill is. That is why they have given their time to help. I am sure the volunteers who tutored you would be the first to say that the opportunity to work with you has been enormously rewarding for them too.

Because reading is so precious, the Howard League has made it a priority in the work it does and its President and CEO, Tony Gibbs and Mike Williams are here in support. Because they know how important literacy is, the Chief Executive of the Department of Corrections, Mr Ray Smith, His Worship Mr Guppy, the Mayor of Upper Hutt and the Chief Human Rights Commissioner, David Rutherford, are all here today. Those of us who watch from the sidelines and who wish you well, we too feel happy in what you have achieved and we admire greatly the effort you have made.

Learning as an adult take special effort and determination and courage. As adults, we do not have the structure for learning around us. There are too many distractions. Too many of our friends do not see the point.

So let me concentrate on the point. Or rather, the two points I would like to make about your achievements. The first is specific to literacy skills, the second a more general one.

The first point is that reading is essential to participation in any society, however small and closed; however big and open. So it matters in this place, as well as outside.

If you do not have literacy skills, you live on the fringes. You need to rely on others to write on your behalf, even about matters that are private. You need to rely on others too to bring to your attention what you need to know. You get your knowledge through filters. You cannot fill in the forms that our modern society requires for everything. You are limited in

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the help you can give to those you love. Without literacy, you cannot satisfy the curiosity that all human beings have. You cannot follow your own nose and be your own person. Today in the information world of the internet, that means you are cut off from a world of possibilities and excitement and connection.

Literacy sets everyone free to be themselves and to participate fully in the societies of which we are all part. So that is why literacy skills matter so much. They are a gain not only for the individual, but for everyone, your families and the communities you belong to and New Zealand. Because if no one in New Zealand can afford to be without literacy skills, it is also true that New Zealand cannot afford the waste of talent in anyone who lacks literacy skills.

The second reason for saluting your achievements in this programme is because you have not just reached a destination, you have committed to a journey. You have learned how to learn - and you have done it the hard way. Learning any new skill or area of knowledge takes effort and perseverance. There may be a few geniuses who find it easy. But the rest of us find it hard. As I have mentioned, you have come to this as adults which makes it harder yet.

In getting over this hurdle, you have shown that you can continue to acquire skills and knowledge. The reality is, everyone has to continue to learn new skills and obtain new knowledge in life because nothing stands still. That is true even in the area I work in. You might think that law is pretty unchanging. Not a bit of it. It changes all the time as society changes and as Parliament passes new legislation. So continuous education is a big part of my life. It does not get easier as you get to be as old as me. But that is the way of the world. Most areas of work and society change much faster than the law. So everyone has to adapt all the time to the new and everyone has to learn new skills and take on board new information.

At this time of rightful celebration of your achievement I have to tell you that there is also some not so good news and that is that the effort is not over. Literacy is the biggest hurdle, because it is the skill you need to learn more. But you cannot give up on learning.

Moving forward is part of the culture of New Zealand. It is with our country that I want to conclude my remarks. When I was a lawyer I did a lot of cases about the Treaty of Waitangi. Since I have been a judge I have also had a lot of cases in which we have had to consider the Treaty and those times. Sometimes I think I am never going to get away from the 1840s, but they are very interesting times to think about.

I do not believe that Maori were tricked by the Treaty. They were a vigorous and confident people who embraced the modern, even while as Apirana Ngata was later to say, continuing to hold to and honour their own traditions. Literacy was one of the most important advantages that the chiefs saw in the new world they signed up to.

Signing up to the Treaty was an act of courage. I think a nation founded on such leap of faith and which came together in such beauty at Waitangi is a nation of which we can be very proud. We need to hold on to the courage to adopt the modern while holding on to what matters in our past. To do that we need – all of us – to continue to learn.

The New Zealand poet, Allen Curnow 50 years ago asked when New Zealand would stop thinking like a colony of England and learn what he called “the trick of standing upright here”. Glenn Colquhoun, a poet who works as a doctor in the far north came up with a contemporary perspective in a poem a few years ago. He said, “The trick of standing upright here is the trick of using both feet”. But the trick of standing was not enough. He thought we had to walk upright here in New Zealand and that it was an art, not a trick. He concluded:

The art of walking upright here,
Is the art of using both feet.
One is for holding on.
One is for letting go.

I like this thought. None of us can stand still. We need to develop and move. Not discarding who we are and our past histories, as a country and as individuals, but being able to let go as well and move into the future with courage and optimism, as our forefathers at Waitangi did. That is a pretty good tradition and it is in that tradition that your achievements today should be seen.

BB King once said that the beautiful thing about learning is that nobody can take it away from you. Better than that, the more you use your skills, the stronger they will be and the more they will ripple out to benefit those around you.

So well done to you and to your tutors – and good luck for the learning ahead.
