

**Address by the President
of Assumption University
at the 36th Commencement Exercises
At Queen Sirikit National Convention Center
January 24, 2009**

Chairman of the University Council,
President Emeritus,
The Campus Minister,
Members of AU Community,
Honored Guests,
Parents
Alumni, and
Dear Graduates of Class XXXVI

May I first acknowledge some of the dignitaries who have joined us today to honor the Class of 2007 on their graduation.

I would also like to thank everyone else who came to congratulate our graduates on the completion of an important achievement and to celebrate their commencement of a new and exciting phase of their lives. Those of you who are graduating have arrived at this milestone through your intelligence and perseverance, but we all must also acknowledge the great contribution made by your families, whose love and, in many cases, selfless sacrifices have played such an important role in paving the way that has brought you here today.

On behalf of all the members of the University Council, faculty, staff, and honoured guests, it gives me great pleasure to say congratulations to all graduates of the Class of 2007 and to honor your success. We recognize your hard work, commitments, and achievements. You all deserve to enjoy this moment to the full, to savor its sweetness, and to remember it till the end of your life.

This, however, should also be a day of reflection as well as celebration and I hope you will bear with me as I engage in my own thoughts on the significance of the day. The impetus for these thoughts was in an article in the "International Herald Tribune: The global edition of the New York Times," that I happened to read in June. In it, the author Sara Rimer noted that elite universities were being forced to ask: "Is there life besides Wall Street?" This is, of course, a question that cannot fail to be even more relevant today. I was particularly struck by the

observations of Professor Howard Gardner, whose “reflection” seminars were designed to push undergraduates to think more deeply about the connection between their education and aspiration. He wanted to encourage students to consider public services and careers other than the consulting and financial jobs that for some years have seemed to be the natural career move for so many graduates of top colleges.

The appeal of these jobs seemed to be obvious – the money, the promise of stimulating work, the security provided by the knowledge that the new graduates would be working alongside their friends, as well as the fact that they demanded a commitment of only two or three years, made these positions very attractive. The world of the high paying corporate jobs to which the students were being lured seemed a logical step after college.

To me, the article is quite correct in asking us to consider the question whether a life in the world of high finance really is the only valid possible use for a college education. If you think back on your early days on campus I believe that many of you have had broader visions of what you would like to do with your life. As is the case with every generation of college students, I am certain that many of you came to AU more committed to change, of yourself and of the world, rather than merely for personal enrichment. Our present generations stand together with Barack Obama who caught the attention of American voters along with many other peoples around the world, with his theme of change, as he sounded an impassioned call to public services and gave warnings against the pursuit of narrow self-interest. I hope that we have given our graduates the tools to continue this larger goal of positive change in the world.

This is not to say that one should reject the prosperous life that education often makes possible, but that we also – hopefully, have kept an interest in using graduation as a stepping stone for making the world better somehow. The point of our education is not to make us rich but to give us the knowledge, skills, and wisdom to do something that is really meaningful with our lives.

We Come to AU to Change the World.

I am further moved to reflect today by the front cover of “2008 Postgraduate and Doctoral Program Prospectus,” which clearly states the purpose of Graduate Studies to be “**Educating Intelligences and Active Minds to Change the World.**” Not long after, someone posed a question to me on the Internet, asking whether

or not a university can influence the intelligence of a person. This simple question stimulated me to reflect on the main purpose and mission of Assumption University. Certainly we can provide knowledge and information, but that does not seem to be enough in a world that is so rapidly changing. I thought about our university and recognized that we did go beyond this static learning and that we were providing students with a more dynamic approach to themselves, their career, and to the world.

In other words, I hope that our graduates of today have found in their years on campus a way to adapt to a world of constant change, one that demands not the acquisition of static information but an ability to adapt to ever-changing economic and social contexts and for oneself to become an agent of change. We have heard this as a theme so often repeated recently. Change was the catchword used in the race for presidency between Obama and McCain. Both of them seemed each to base his campaign on who would be better for leading the United States into a period of needed change. This concern is, of course, not limited to the Americans. Each one of us wants to see certain changes in our own country, whether they be political, economic, social, technological, or even just personal.

What I kept pondering on is the actual meaning of the intriguing phrase: "Educating Intelligences and Active Minds to Change the World." In what sense are intelligences active and how could we, at the university, help prepare you to effectively change the world?

That brought up the second question: how would you bring about change?

The third question considers the scope of our mission of change: do we at Assumption University have the skill to accomplish its mission of changing the world? I dare not venture to interpret the statement on my own. My wisdom dictates that I quote a source.

"Educating Intelligences and Active Minds to Change the World" is a vision and mission and at the same time it is an aspiration. This means that ... A university through its professors can educate ordinary students to have the power of perceiving, learning, understanding and knowing about things. It also means that the lecturers educate students to use the mental ability to comprehend complex problems in the world today. Those students with Active Minds can learn because they are

inquisitive and curious to learn through reading, discussing, listening, reflecting and active participation both in and outside classes. "Thinking skill" forms a very important mechanism in the process (Komolmas, 2008).

How does Assumption University go about accomplishing this?

First, it has to start with the formation of the individual.

There are different stages of formation and transformation. When you entered the university as freshmen, you learned the art to live and to survive the campus life. The emphasis of education at AU is not only for the intellectual dimension alone; other aspects of life are also provided. They come in different forms, either through rules and regulations, engagement with academic as well as administrative staff or among your peers. Through life's journey, we may have good times and bad times. But through these crises, failures, or difficult times, we must try to get lessons out of them.

To learn is to think, reflect and try to internalize value of the experiences. If your mind remains active, then you are eager to learn and reflect on new challenges. The beautiful thing about learning is that nobody can take from you what you have learned. And it is an endless process. As human beings, we have to evolve, to move to the next level of understanding and growth. There's a lesson in almost everything you do and experience, and getting the lesson is how you move forward – the lessons that have had the greatest impact on your life. Thus the inner wisdom is more precious than wealth. It can create change in a person. A real education should be able to benefit and **change** people's lives.

Second, change involves group transformation.

Being educated means that one is transformed into a better person. He/she will be guided by knowledge, wisdom, principles, values, and moral maturity. Once he/she is away from the campus leading what is called the real life, he/she has the right to pursue meanings and happiness in life as well as personal wealth. This means the right to go for that career, that hobby, that lifestyle that calls to each of us most deeply and offers us the most personal meaning – even if it's not the most prestigious, richest or the career your father or mother has always wanted you to pursue. Equipped with knowledge and other traits, you are capable to work in a team, to become a source of synergy, to solve problems, to take initiatives

and to create new things. These innovations then become your contribution and the source of a better life and eventually a better world for all of us.

On campus, you are provided with group assignments in different subjects as well as other activities organized by the Office of Student Affairs and various clubs. They are supposed to provide you with opportunities to work with others in a team. Training to work in a team has become a necessity as the world has become more complex as well as the problems that plague the globe. With sincerity and openness in sharing ideas, teamwork that results in synergy can help solve problems – both personal and professional.

Third, change is global.

Let's look at a list of some of the "Top 100 People (and their works) that Changed Our World." Just to name a few of them, we see:

- Christopher Columbus (1451-1506), Italian explorer who laid the groundwork for the New World
- Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519), maker of innovative paintings and sculptures
- Charles Darwin, author of the theories of natural selection, the origin of species (1809-1882)
- Karl Marx who gave us a new view of society (1818-1883); and
- Albert Einstein who redefined both space and time (1879-1955).

Moreover, we can look to our illustrious contemporaries: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, and most significantly His Majesty King Bhumibol Adulyadej.

Each of these men and women came into the world, examined its current state, or at least our current state of knowledge of it, and then worked hard to bring about a change in our conception of the world and of the world itself.

To further elaborate on this, let us take Albert Einstein as an example. He discarded our assumptions about the nature of the world, and instead developed the theory of relativity – a completely new conception of space and time which later became the most basic and most general framework for the world. The predictions made by this theory were very strange but when an expedition travelled to an eclipse in Africa to test the prediction that space would oddly curve towards a heavy object like the sun, moving light a bit out of its expected position, the

theory received support. Because of Einstein's persistent inquiries, the universe came to be seen as something quite different and quite wonderful. Since then our conception of that universe on the most basic level has changed dramatically. From this study for theoretical purposes, the atomic power was developed a few decades later. For better or worse, it became a dominant force in our lives. Without intending to, Einstein in some ways changed the way we live.

What happened is the result of lifetime work, passion, persistence and education and this example suggests the amount of hard work that truly goes into change. The world cannot, however, be changed all at once. I believe that Einstein was faced with a problem and sought to solve it with all the resources he had available – in his case, mathematical resources. As you enter into a world full of problems, you need to be aware of many opportunities that can help bring about positive changes in the world. I very much hope that we have prepared you as effective change-agents as far as your career is concerned. I would like to review some areas where your efforts are still needed.

Educational institutions enhance the critical stance taken in relation to civil society. The analytic skills that you have acquired here should serve you in good stead as you engage with the social and political world. One must, I hope you have learned, not merely accept the way things have always seemed, but look beyond the surface to basic principles and the way things can be.

The techniques of social manipulation that you may have developed in society can allow you to apply that analysis to particular types of change that can provide the basis for building a new society. You must be aware of the world agenda on climate change, food crisis, terrorism, and the like. But as important are the many conflicts that have been occurring for many years and are quite dangerous to both those fighting and the many innocent victims of the fights.

Such efforts to change, of course, are not to be taken lightly. Education requires a great sense of responsibility. One aspect of such responsibility is precisely the commitment to be involved in the world in a way that is not entirely oriented towards material success. Seek comfort, certainly, but realize that being responsible for true and needed change is apt in the long run to bring greater satisfactions.

I do not believe that education is a panacea for all the problems of a society, but it can identify problems and train people to have the capacity to find

solutions. You must use these capacities to move the world forward. Your degree at AU means that you're ready to change the world. It can happen only if you invest your energy and enthusiasm towards that goal. You are required to turn your hopes and dreams into reality. Deep inside all of us, there is a little voice whispering to us. We must learn to listen and believe in it. It makes a meaningful difference in the world.

As leaders of the new world, you must be able to give direction, think of the root cause, plan and have a clear vision. You may still think about the compensation which you will receive – as is inevitable – but you should avoid becoming too concerned with money. Remember, there is no guarantee that you will be placed in a top position. So, be ready to pitch in at any level.

Perspective

Education, as we have seen, is critical for enforcing change. But as change occurs, all institutions must also change, including those responsible for change. Once we have identified our problems, in a manner akin to Einstein, we must reflect deeply on our schools of all levels to see how they can be improved.

At the personal level, I would additionally hope to see empowered, aware individuals with clear values and visions, and in loving relationships. People who lead lives with a sense of purpose and meaning have competencies that enable them to make wise decisions and take effective, responsible life-affirming actions.

At AU, each of you unknowingly passed through a four-year process of formation. As a freshman to the University, you must learn about self first. Personal goals, learning style, sense of belonging are some of the aspects leading to self-awareness. Then you came to explore yourself through community services. To be able to enrich oneself, a person must be left to engage the world beyond self. Once you are raised up to this level, then, you are ready to live for others. That leads us to self-offering, to live for others as professionals. You know how to integrate life, value responsibilities, and accountability, as you engage yourself vertically as well as horizontally. You become the guardian of this world, to make this world a better place to live in through the betterment of self, our society, and the world as a whole.

Change of Self

I have talked at some length about changing the world but I also need to remark on changing oneself. One's knowledge, one's language, one's actions, and one's goals all stand in relation to the world and you must be ready to change these things, to change one's very self. The world is too fast moving for us to remain the same person throughout life. Certain values, of course, must remain the same but above these; there is always much room for adaptation and change.

You already experienced this when you entered AU. When first confronted with a rather strange environment, you may not have known how to deal with it but eventually you adapted. At that stage of your life, it was time to become a new person and to shift to a new environment, with different tasks and challenges, served as a forge which help form this new self. Some aspects of yourself that you were very attached to were probably lost and that perhaps saddened you. But you changed and grew and thus you are capable of turning all the new possibilities before you in your favor.

You are now on the verge of a similar transition and you can expect to face new environments, new people, and new challenges. And so in a few years, you will find yourself looking back on your time at AU. I am certain you will have some regret for the loss of the good times you had, but also using the passage of time between now and then to reflect on how much you have grown.

Do not think that this is the last transition you will make in your life. Constant change and adaptation will be needed to keep on top of situations that arise. You will need to constantly recreate yourself, constantly leave behind parts of yourself and face the exciting challenge of growth. But always remember that a changed self should not be narcissistic, that we should change in ourselves and use that change to help the world change.

Conclusion

In conclusion, may I quote from the words of Mahatma Gandhi, a great revolutionary. He said: "In a gentle way you can shake the world." The following five small things may help you if you want to change the world:

1. All significant change has occurred as a result of the courage and commitment of individuals. So have courage and be committed to what you want to do.
2. Believe that you are unique and have a unique purpose and potential in life. Whatever you do counts and it can make a difference.
3. Be clear on what you want to change and why you want to change. The how will come. The genesis for change is awareness.
4. Don't wait for things to be right in order to begin. Do what you can, with what you have.
5. All meaningful and lasting change starts first in your imagination and then it works its way out (Angier, 2001).

In order to change persons and things around us, we must first change ourselves, our habits, and our attitude towards things.

Dear Graduates:

Our world, our nation, our society, and some of our families, including some of us, are facing difficult challenges. In the long term, education is the only viable solution to our problems. Leadership and innovations prove to be essential components of change. The use of knowledge and information guided by wisdom becomes important factors in supporting and directing change.

You have now finished one phase of your education, but do not think that you are over with learning. Education today is a lifetime process and you can expect to keep on learning throughout your life.

Seek small improvements. That's the only way we can begin. And when it happens, it lasts. Continue to be a lifelong learner and you will be able to change your own world and the world outside you. Do not seek changes at random but rather have them engage in the pursuit of meaning and happiness. Life will be meaningful and worth living.

I can tell you that your degree from AU means you're ready to change the world if you invest your energy and enthusiasm required to turn your hopes and dreams into reality. Trust your heart and success will come to you.

Continue to pursue the process of educating your intelligences and keep your minds ever active so that you can change the world into a better place for us all to live in.

Now, you are members of the AU family. Be proud and honor your "alma mater." And on behalf of the University and our honored guests, again I do congratulate you on your achievements.

I pray that the Almighty God be with you, may He accompany you in every step you take, and lift you up in case you stumble and fall. May He sustain you and bless you with happiness always.

Congratulations and thank you for your attention.

Bancha Saenghiran, f.s.g., Ph.D.

President

January 24, 2009

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