



Good afternoon and welcome to the most prestigious, the glitziest and the most well-deserved and fun graduation ceremony happening anywhere in the country today! Congratulations, Foxes Academy learners and graduates of 2016, the greatest graduating class in the history of the world! At least that's what they told me on the way in.

This is a wonderful day for you learners and a bittersweet one for your parents, and the staff of Foxes as they see you move on from here to the next stage of life as useful, independent, free

people. And all of us join together in wishing you the very best for your futures, which we are sure will be very bright indeed.

It's a real honour to be invited to talk to you! I was one of the few people in the Down's syndrome community who missed the Foxes' documentary series 'The Special Needs Hotel' so I didn't know what to expect when Olly and I came down from London to Minehead earlier in the year. We were so impressed with the quality of the meals we ate and the service we received at the hotel, but even more so with the positive attitude and friendliness we encountered from every single learner we spent time with.

And it struck me then that our country is run by people who went to Oxford and Cambridge, but that perhaps life's most important skills are taught here at Foxes. Yes you can bake exceptional cakes and that's so important but I don't mean that. Yes you also have a good grasp of nutrition and know how to get stubborn limescale off a pair of taps but I don't mean that either. And yes you've learnt how to get a party going by dancing like Diversity and singing like One Direction and those are very, very useful things to have learnt.

But here at Foxes you have also learnt things that most of the people in the world have still to learn.

You know how to look after yourselves and others.
You have learnt to respect everyone irrespective of their achievements.
You know how to live with other people peacefully and have fun doing so.
You know how to support each other in your weaknesses and encourage each other in your strengths.

It's nice to be important but it's more important to be nice and all the Foxes learners I met were thoroughly nice people too, men and women who went out of their way to welcome us and clearly always tried their best, no matter how tough the challenge put in front of them.

In a bleak week with the newspapers full of bad news it seems clearer than ever that the world needs more Foxes graduates!

I think that every human being is a whole.

Now I'm very good at exams. I love reading, I'm good at this. I'm terrible at planning. I was still writing this speech five minutes ago. I forgot my hairbrush. I don't get that embarrassed. I had to wear a moustache for a show, walking up and down Portobello Road with a really realistic moustache and beard. Some people would've been very ashamed, not me. But I had three calls this week from Olly's school asking for permission slips and so on that I had forgotten to send in. I went to Oxford recently with my friends - three out of four of us lost our train tickets on the train on the way home. Renee Zellweger who plays Bridget Jones is an amazing actress but has no idea how to get a stain out of a carpet. Miranda Hart - she is excellent at writing comedy, but she gets so frightened before every show she's sometimes sick and always gets horrible wind. Sarah Hadland, runs marathons but is hopeless at maths.



I think that all human beings are like this.... we all have strengths and weaknesses. If you excel at Astrophysics - there's a chance you don't know how to open the bathroom window when you have a shower so the plaster doesn't rot. If you're very, very organised perhaps you don't find it easy to make time for your friends when they're down. Every characteristic has a good side and a bad side.

And so I tell you that whether people outside Foxes realise it or not, they have as much to learn from you as you have to learn from them.

Please teach the people you meet that if they try their best they will bring great dignity to the workplace.

Please teach them how to enjoy themselves by enjoying your work so much that they loosen up and enjoy it too.

Please teach them that there is no such thing as perfection and that life is not a race.

Congratulations to those of you who already have work placements to go to and also to those who are going to be interns or volunteers. Volunteers are too often seen as amateurs: but remember,

Noah's Ark was built by amateurs. The Titanic was built by professionals. Volunteers don't get paid, not because they're worthless but because they're priceless. But we do want to see a fair society where everyone gets paid for the work they do and be assured that I and all the parents here will continue to fight alongside you writing letters, starting petitions, being a pain in the bottom to our politicians until we have achieved that in our country.

Never think that you are unimportant. Everybody is.

If you think you are too small to be effective, you have never been in bed with a mosquito.

In these graduation speeches it's traditional to give advice so here we go:

- Practice, practice, practice. It's hard to get worse at something if you practice. Getting better at things is hard work and not many people are prepared to do it. If you are you will go far.
- Look after your friends.
- Always move forward. Never backwards. Never let anyone tell you you can't. When you guys were born nobody would've believed that you would be standing here today. Nobody gets to decide you can't do something except you.
- Remember that you are the changing the world for the generation who are coming after you. So whether you wind up blazing your own trail, or stumbling blindly down it as I did, do your best. But don't give yourself a hard time if you get things wrong. Everybody gets things wrong. Prime Ministers get things wrong. Even Harry Styles makes mistakes occasionally.
- The only honour that counts is that which you earn and that which you give. When you do well honour yourself.
- Love your parents. You will eventually realise that there are no grown-ups. We are all children in various stages of growing up. As you go off to live and work independently spare a thought for your parents who maybe thought at one time they'd be able to keep you by their sides forever. We parents may not know everything under the sun, but one thing is for certain: we think you're amazing.





Have fun, don't worry, be happy, pick up your towels off the floor, and don't get other people to do things you can do for yourself. The hard work and determination you have shown to get to this point is an example to us all. Remember that you can do anything you put your minds to. Have confidence in who you are and what you have achieved so far. Reach for your dreams! Thank you and congratulations Foxes Academy 2016

The work an unknown good man has done is like a vein of water flowing hidden underground, secretly making the ground green.