

**Speech by Professor SHIH Choon Fong
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University Cultural Centre Theatre**

OUR JOURNEY: PROMISE AND PERILS

Pro-Chancellors Dr Andrew Chew, Mr Ngiam Tong Dow and Dr Cheong Siew Keong

Chairman, NUS Board of Trustees, Mr Wong Ngit Liong

Members of Board of Trustees

Distinguished Guests

Colleagues, Alumni and Friends

Opening

The University Awards in its present form was inaugurated in 2002. My speech on that occasion was entitled "*Our Journey: Learn, Discover and Serve*".

Since then, I have often touched on qualities for pursuing excellence, both for the individual and for the University. A recurring theme has been our larger purpose of service to society through research, education and enterprise. A consistent thread has been the vital need to be vigilant and responsive to opportunities and challenges in the competitive global landscape.

In the earlier years, as NUS embarked on a journey to remake itself, there was much for me to share. This being my seventh, and final, University Awards as NUS President, finding something fresh to say has become a more daunting challenge.

I see the University Awards as snapshots of our winners' ever-changing journey of excellence. I also see the University Awards as snapshots of NUS' ever-changing journey of excellence. This journey – for each of us and for the university as a whole – is what I want to reflect on this evening.

So today I shall speak about our achievements, about our promise, and also, the perils that may cross our path.

The Changing Face of NUS

We have come a long way since the turn of the millennium.

Today's NUS looks very different from a decade ago. This very building – our UCC – was completed in the year 2000. In our centennial year, Bukit Timah campus has returned to our fold after an absence of close to three decades, to the great joy of many of us, particularly our Bukit Timah alumni. The newly renovated Arts canteen even has an air-conditioned upper deck, a far cry from sweatier times.

Beyond these extrinsic changes of new structures and appearances, I hope that returning alumni would notice the intrinsic changes which are deeper and more enduring. They have to do with the heart, mind and soul of our University.

The arts and culture are flourishing on campus, complemented by the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music which moved to its new home in 2006. Rather than “one-size-fits-all”, our students, staff and faculty now enjoy wider access to a broader spectrum of offerings and opportunities to learn, to discover, and to serve. The spirit of enterprise is alive and well among our students, alumni and faculty, especially those who have experienced our Overseas Colleges.

Another deep change concerns our core mission. Our mission now encompasses a virtuous circle of creating, imparting, and applying knowledge. Let me offer some examples.

We now have two Research Centers of Excellence, established with substantial external funding exceeding S\$150 million each. The first center is in quantum technologies. The second is in cancer research. Each RCE is a bold undertaking to build global excellence in research, education and knowledge transfer.

We also have other cutting-edge initiatives such as the Singapore Gastric Cancer Consortium, the Solar Energy Research Institute of Singapore, as well as the NRF's Campus for Research Excellence and Technological Enterprise, or CREATE. Co-located at University Town, CREATE will make discovery and innovation an integral part of living and learning at NUS.

In sum, NUS is transforming. It is reinventing itself. Once a respected teaching institution, NUS is now a global university fulfilling a dual mission of teaching and research. Beyond producing graduate manpower, NUS today embraces a greater focus on nurturing talent and building intellectual capital. In tandem, NUS has grown to become a major player in the global arena of research universities. We now compete neck-and-neck with leading universities for faculty and students for whom pursuing excellence is second nature.

Such intrinsic changes, now deeply embedded in our community, help sustain NUS on its ongoing journey of excellence. Our annual University Awards attest to how a culture of excellence has taken root among our NUS community.

This evening, we celebrate the outstanding accomplishments of members of our community in the areas of research, education, and service. We applaud your

exemplary efforts and express our gratitude to you for helping to infuse a culture of excellence at NUS. We recognize your contributions in making a difference to our University. Tonight's event shows how each of our individual journeys contributes to the collective NUS journey. And knowing how success at work often depends on support from home, it is my privilege to welcome your family and friends to this event, to share our joy and to celebrate over dinner.

The Traveler's Inner Compass

One of my favorite stories is Paulo Coelho's *The Alchemist*. At one level, this is the story of Santiago, a shepherd boy who has a big dream of finding treasure under the pyramids of faraway Egypt. He sets about pursuing his dream, first by selling his flock to raise money to make the long and arduous journey across the desert. In his journey, the boy encounters adventures and setbacks, romance and betrayals, promise and perils. Through them all, he eventually discovers his treasure.

At another level, *The Alchemist* is about Santiago discovering his inner strengths and learning that it is not impossible to realize his dream. In the process, Santiago discovers a treasure far better than gold. This treasure was the journey itself, the discoveries made, and the wisdom acquired. Through this story, we the readers also learn about the intrinsic attributes for realizing one's aspirations – purpose, passion, and perseverance.

NUS' Journey towards Greatness

NUS too is dreaming big. At last year's State of the University Address, Senior Deputy President Tan Chorh Chuan and Provost Tan Eng Chye shared the stage with me and spoke of NUS' dream.

In my speech, I reiterated the centerpiece in our strategy to realize the promise of greatness for NUS. This centerpiece is *G-10-10* – growing 10 great programs or departments in 10 years.

In his speech entitled "*G-10-10: A User's Guide*", Chorh Chuan shared perspectives of *G-10-10* as a University-facilitated, bottom-up process. Eng Chye wrapped up the evening with a call to realize our dream.

The world's center of academic gravity is shifting towards a new rising Asia. Singapore and its universities can ride this tide and seize the opportunity to move forward. Against this backdrop, *G-10-10* is an integral part of NUS' strategy for global excellence. *G-10-10* will help galvanize our community to scale new heights and contribute to Singapore's transformation into a global knowledge and innovation hub. Purpose, passion and perseverance will help us overcome challenges, see possibilities, and fulfill our promise.

Perils along the Way

Even with the strongest of purpose, passion and perseverance, some perils may still disrupt our journey. Let me offer a few tips and share my experiences as a fellow traveler.

Fear of Failure and Disappointment

“I’m afraid that it would all be a disappointment, so I prefer just to dream about it.”

With these words, an elderly crystal merchant in *The Alchemist* gives voice to the first peril we may encounter on our journey. This peril is “kia-si” – or in the Queen’s English, the incapacitating fear of failure and disappointment. This lack of courage can be crippling for both the strong and the weak, the incumbent and the upstart.

The crystal merchant in *The Alchemist* never pursues his dream of making a pilgrimage to Mecca because of fear that the reality and the experience may be different from his dream. The merchant would rather grow old polishing crystal than take a chance and chase his dreams. Rather than inspiring him to test his limits, his dream leads him to fear his limits. “Kia-si” incapacitates the now-elderly merchant. He never takes the first step.

Crisis of Arrogance and Complacency

Of late, we have been reading reports in the local media about complacency. Indeed, this is the second peril.

Complacency often stems from misguided contentment or unwarranted arrogance, a feeling of having arrived or being in the lead, even as the competition catches up. “We’ve done enough. We’re good enough. We’re high enough in the rankings. Let’s consolidate.” Complacency spares no one. It can catch us unawares.

Let me describe a well-known experiment. Put a live frog in hot water and it will leap out. Put the same frog in cooler water and gradually raise the temperature. The frog gets used to the slowly rising heat, and before it even realizes, the weakened frog is unable to leap out. It gets cooked. What’s the moral here? When arrogance and complacency set in, we end up in hot soup.

Complacency often arises when we take our eyes off the ever-changing competitive landscape. For instance, the passenger steamship industry failed to recognize that it was not just in the shipping business, it was in the business of transportation. It was sunk by its competitors high in the sky.

Another example is IBM, which was the dominant computer maker worldwide through the 70’s. When I was a graduate student, the IBM 360 was the mainframe of choice for universities and corporations. This contributed to the view that a computer had no place in the home, just as Apple was breaking into the market. In his book *Who Says Elephants Can’t Dance?* former IBM CEO Lou Gerstner wrote that IBM suffered a “very public near collapse in the early 1990’s.” Gerstner

recognized the peril of complacency when he described IBM as “frozen in place. What it needed was someone to grab hold of it and shake it back into action.”

Compared to the steamship business and the old IBM, NUS has been more vigilant. We now recognize that beyond manpower training, we are in the business of attracting talent and developing minds. This knowledge business is not merely local or regional. It is global. And it involves the virtuous circle of excellence – creating, imparting and applying knowledge.

Iron Cage of Mindless Bureaucracy

The third peril is what sociologist Max Weber calls the “iron cage” of bureaucracy. Bureaucrats see themselves as guardians of rules and regulations, which of course have a purpose in organizations. The mindless bureaucrat, however, makes each procedure an end in itself. They are themselves trapped by blind and unquestioning adherence to regulations and procedures.

I am mindful of a timeless saying by Henry Thoreau:

“Through want of enterprise and faith, men are where they are, buying and selling, and spending their lives like serfs”.

Mindless bureaucracy is a timeless problem. It enslaves talents and cripples dreams and enterprise through excessive caution or perfunctory expediency. The iron cage of mindless bureaucracy insulates and isolates, preserving the status quo. In a period of rapid change, we maintain the status quo at our own peril.

To speed us on our journey of excellence, we need an enlightened bureaucracy – one that enables and facilitates excellence. Enlightened bureaucracy does not constrain nor contain. Enlightened bureaucrats see their role as facilitators, rather than as mere enforcers of rules and regulations. They possess a sense of service and a desire to help. They take pleasure in making life and work easier for others, trusting them to act responsibly. At the highest level, enlightened bureaucrats dedicate themselves to furthering organizational goals.

Like the flu, none of us is immune to the ills of “kia-si”, complacency or mindless bureaucracy. With courage, vigilance and enterprise, we can keep the three perils at bay, and better still, keep them in their own iron cage.

Closing

Towards the end of the year, I shall embark on a “journey to the west”, going to the Middle East to take up a new role as President of KAUST, the King Abdullah University of Science and Technology. We may take different paths, but distance cannot separate fellow travelers in the journey of excellence. I will bring to Saudi Arabia many memories from my 12 years here. Not just fond memories, but many enriching lessons and experiences.

Some of my most precious lessons have been from the winners of these annual University Awards, like those who are here this evening. I have learned how incredibly diverse our people are: you hail from different countries and cultures, your work makes evident the broad range of scholarship at this University, your accomplishments show that some personal breakthroughs come quickly, others through long hard years.

Yet in the midst of all this diversity, I see something in common. In your own different ways, all contribute. A spark – whether a new idea, a passion for teaching, a love for a subject, or an act of service – a spark is fanned into a flame, and it becomes light for others. You inspire us.

It has been my privilege to be a part of NUS' transformation and continuing journey of excellence. We have built up momentum and my hope for us, both as individuals and as a community, is that we journey far – very far – farther than others expect us to. My hope is that NUS will be a place where each of us can dream the impossible, and make possible what is glimpsed. My hope is that we will enable our people to discover their passions in life, fulfill their promise, and serve country and society.

Congratulations and thank you.