Message by our Guest Speaker, Adriaan Odendaal (Class of 2008)

Thank you, Professor Corne Schutte, for the introduction, and thank you class of 2021 for having me at this special event. Congratulations to you again!

It's really amazing to be here with you, 13 years after our class graduated. I am pleased to still see so many familiar faces. Some of you I know as lecturers from my time here at Stellenbosch, and some of you I know as classmates who are now lecturers, teaching a new generation.

We should be grateful that we are able to gather here tonight during this time of uncertainty and be able to celebrate you this evening. We have a lot of smart people here tonight who have dressed for the occasion. It reminds me of a quote by Oscar Wilde: "You can never be overdressed or overeducated." That's good to know, especially tonight!

Personally, it's been a bit of a rollercoaster for me over the past week. I needed to travel to London for work once South Africa was taken off the UK's Red List in October. This went along with planning visas, getting tested, ensuring everything was in place. With all the regulations set up for COVID these days, I don't think I've done so much reading since university to ensure we had covered everything. We eventually got all our papers in order and got into London with ease. Once there, we actually had a great time. We stayed with my brother, caught up with old colleagues and friends, and got to meet the Sportable Technology team I am joining early next year. Overall, we had a great time, with everything going to plan. Then, on Thursday (25 November 2021), the cracks started showing. South Africa announced it had identified a new and highly mutated variant of COVID-19, later named Omicron.

We started hearing about the UK closing its borders and cancelling direct flights between South Africa and the UK. However, we were flying back to Cape Town via Dubai with Emirates on Saturday, so everything still seemed to be in order. My friends told me the UK government would want to kick all the Saffers (South Africans) out of the country anyway, so we had nothing to worry about. But like Mike Tyson once said, "Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth".

As the world was losing its mind over Omicron, we were trying to stay calm and stick to the plan: get back home safely. The Saturday morning we made sure we got on the train early to be at the airport with more than enough time to spare in case something went wrong. As we walked toward the check-in counter I gave a sigh of relief, thinking that we had made it. Boy, was I wrong. "Sir," the Emirates lady at the start of the queue said, "Are you flying to Cape Town?" I looked around me and could see there were other people around us on their mobile phones, frantically making calls. I realised what was happening. "Yes, my wife and I are traveling to Cape Town." "Sorry, sir, but your flight has just been cancelled. You will need to make alternative arrangements. Sorry for the inconvenience. This news just came in."

My wife and I stared at each other. It felt like we were just waking up after a car crash. Everything was fuzzy. We took some time to take a few deep breaths, but snapped out of it and started thinking about what our options were. Although we love London, we weren't going to sit and wait to see what was going to happen and risk being stuck in the icy UK for who knows how long. I won't go into the details of how we figured out what to do and all the curse words that were used. But, eventually, we got two of the last three tickets on Ethiopian Airlines out of London to Cape Town on that same day. We were relieved.

As we went through security and eventually into the waiting area, I was still not convinced that we were actually going to make it home, but once our gate opened I started relaxing. I was watching

BBC at the time, where Boris Johnson, the UK Prime Minister, was making a speech about what was unfolding. The BBC was showing clips of people at Heathrow hopelessly talking to people at the airline counters and people outside the airport on their phones in tears, trying to find a way home. Although we were on the "other side" on our way home, I could not stop thinking about the fact that, with so much uncertainty around us, some people had not yet found a solution and that things could have gone the other way for us.

At that moment, I remembered that I needed to prepare a speech for you tonight and thought about what I was going to say. And, given my career and the most recent events, I think you need to know: "Everything will be OK."

I'm not just saying this. This has deeper meaning. Being OK means different things to different people, but for me it's about being able to recover from any setback. I believe being resilient is something you can gear yourself to become. Resilience also makes you able to take on new and daunting challenges, because you know that, even if things do not work out, you can get back up, dust yourself off, learn from the situation and take on the next challenge. As Winston Churchill once said: "Success is the ability to go from one [challenge] to another with no loss of enthusiasm."

I believe finishing your Bachelor's in Industrial Engineering gives you a great foundation for life and also shows that you can take on challenges and conquer them. Although this should not be the end of your learning, it is the start, for most of you, of your professional careers. And this might be frightening. But I am here to say: "Everything will be OK."

I know this because of the people who studied Industrial Engineering with me many years ago – I have seen what they have achieved. This did not come easily; it came with hard work, dedication and continuous learning.

Just to give you some examples of people in our class and where they are now:
• Cornel – The owner and managing director of LED Lighting SA
• Kim – A director at NHS England & NHS Improvement in the UK
• Pierre – Working for Central Operations at Uber in Amsterdam
• Mariette – An associate director at Deloitte New Zealand
• Lizaan – A business analyst in pathology for the Isle of Man government
• David – The process improvement engineer at MediClinic
• Imke – A senior lecturer in Stellenbosch University's Department of Industrial Engineering

I am so very proud to have called these people my classmates and friends. And I hope you get to reflect on these times together fondly as well.

So, after we got onto the plane and I calmed down, I started thinking about what I wish I knew when I had just graduated, given what I know right now. I think if I needed to summarise it, it would be: knowing the importance of entrepreneurial thinking and innovation.

An entrepreneur is essentially someone who can identify a problem, develop a unique solution and be able to monetise the solution. In other words, find a market or people who have this problem and are willing to pay you for the solution. Effectively, it is creating innovation.

Bill Aulet, an MIT professor, defines *Innovation* as being equal to *Invention x Commercialisation*. For innovation, you need the invention (the unique solution) as well as the commercialisation part (whom do you sell to, and how).

Although the basics of entrepreneurship are simple, entrepreneurial thinking is a unique way of problem-solving in a complex world. It is driven by a value proposition – only solving problems worth solving, and using limited resources to do this. This type of thinking is not only for people starting their own business. I believe that, if applied correctly, entrepreneurial thinking can enhance complex decision-making in a variety of settings and help you stand out as a professional.

As an industrial engineer you will, more than most graduates just out of university, have to work and understand more than just one part of a business. Early in your careers you will get exposure to operations, human resources, finances, strategy and marketing. Understanding how any business works as a money-making machine, with all the components working together, is an extremely powerful skill to have.

As an entrepreneur you have to develop these skills on the job as a necessity, but these skills can be learnt outside the "entrepreneurial" context. I am talking about skills like:

• Writing a problem statement
• Ensuring you are solving the right problem
• Quantifying the value proposition
• Defining who will pay for the solution
• Working out how much it will cost
• Making it scalable
• Creating a proof of concept
… And so much more.

It all comes back to being able to create value in an effective way, and making an impact. When I started working, I sometimes found myself solving problems that did not necessarily need solving, but as an engineer I liked creating solutions. Entrepreneurial thinking can help you focus and be more impactful. And I believe that, in a country like South Africa, we need more entrepreneurial thinkers.

In the end it comes down to falling in love with continuous learning, so much so that it becomes a habit. "An investment in knowledge always pays the best interest," to quote Benjamin Franklin. Try to think like a business owner and use the skills you've learnt through your degree to solve real-world problems.

It's also important to find a job worth doing. As Mark Twain famously said: "Find a job you enjoy doing, and you will never have to work a day in your life." But I also just want to tell you that you should not be discouraged if this does not happen immediately. Keep learning and challenging yourself, and you will find your way.

I want to end off by saying that you are privileged to have had the opportunity to be educated at such a prestigious institution as Stellenbosch University, and by such talented lecturers in the Department of Industrial Engineering.

I want to leave you with these words of Malcom X: "Education is our passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to the people who prepare for it today."

Thank you.
Adriaan Odendaal

1 Dec 2021