

DSG Matric Dinner Address, 2019

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*(*Ask 10 matrics in the room to stand up)*

Let's assume that these 10 young women represent all the Grade 1's in South Africa, who (like most of you) walked into their first 'big school' classroom in 2008.

*(*Ask four to sit down)*

Based on what we now know about young South Africans' journeys through school, only six of them have made it to matric. In just a few weeks, these six will write their final exams.

*(*Ask two to sit down)*

Only 4 of them will pass.

*(*Ask three to sit down)*

Of those four, only one will pass well enough to qualify for university.¹

Of course the odds for those of you in this room are far better than the average South African. We can safely assume that nearly all of you will represent that 1 in 10.

That's not because you've worked hard, although I'm sure you have. It's not because you're brilliant, although I'm sure many of you are. It's not because you're necessarily smarter, or more talented, or more deserving than any of the other young people who sat wide-eyed in their Grade 1 class room twelve years ago.

¹ These figures based on: van Broekhuizen H, van der Berg S, Hofmeyr H. Higher Education Access and Outcomes for the 2008 National Matric Cohort [Internet]. Stellenbosch Economic Working Papers 16/16. 2017. doi:10.2139/ssrn.2973723

It's because you had the extraordinary privilege of attending this school — and because of the constellation of people, histories, even coincidences that made that possible.

I'm telling you this, not to preach to you or make you feel guilty. I've never been convinced that guilt is a particularly valuable response to privilege. Some more useful responses might be self-awareness, humility, responsibility. But also (I think) a fiery determination to take all that you've been given — interrogate it, explode it, share it, expand it, explore it. Go make something brave and bountiful with the time you have. The world is open to you in ways that most young people cannot imagine. As the great poet, Mary Oliver put it, "What will you do with this one wild and precious life?"

In preparing for this evening's address, I started to think about what I could possibly say to offer you some sort of compass in answering this question.

I might be 31 with a PHD and trying to write a book. But I'll let you in on a secret — I have no clue what I'm doing! I still don't know 'what I want to be when I grow up'. To start with — I'm old. Sometimes I think the only thing I might come to share with you *Gen-Z* folk is that I met my life partner on a dating app. I went to this school in a time before Facebook and hashtags. And despite spending a year writing about Johannesburg nightclub culture, I have just recently transitioned into that phase of life when I'd rather dance to old music at 11am in my lounge, than to new music at 1am on a dancefloor. For the first time since I was 12, I do puzzles — and I'm not ashamed.

Most of you will have jobs that haven't even been invented yet. You will design your lives, families and careers in ways that would have been unthinkable to your parents. Your generation is already re-imagining its relationship to gender, sexuality, race and the planet — with many young women on the frontlines: Malala Yousafzai, Greta Thunberg, Zulaikha Patel, Autumn Peltier.

I have spent the majority of my twelve years since leaving school invested in causes. In 2007, when I began university (and many of you were soon to begin Grade 1), [350 000](#) of our fellow South Africans died of AIDS. At the time, our president, Mbeki,

was caught up in webs of fear and distrust in Western medical intervention — a story which had been centuries in the making, but was now resulting in millions of people being denied AIDS treatment. Meanwhile, my university had no institutional response to the epidemic: no education programmes, no testing drives, nothing. Students, myself included, took charge. For the next 10 years, my activist work extended beyond HIV to tackle gender-based violence, the housing system, queer rights, and ‘decolonisation’. The point of all this is not to hold myself up as an icon. Instead, I want to suggest that being a ‘good activist’ with good intentions did not automatically make me a ‘good person’ — nor did I always reflect ‘the change I wanted to see in the world’. I argued for the sake of winning; I felt anger more than allegiance; I mistakenly believed I could (and should) take up every mantle. And while I have not lost my fierce commitment to any of these causes, I often gravely misunderstood the people and stakes involved. So, I’ve made many mistakes along the way, most of which I think were mistakes about love.

So, tonight, I want to challenge you, along with all the other things you are re-imagining, to re-imagine ‘love’. It’s such an over-used, clichéd term that I cringe to even say it out loud. But, despite the poverty of the English language to capture all its complexity, it remains the centre of most of our lives, and is the most difficult of all our tasks.

Love is not a feeling or a thing we ‘fall’ into. Nor is it reserved for our private lives. Love can take public form. It’s hard work. It’s an everyday action. And it requires sustained, practical care.

So here are my four lessons on love:

1. Don’t let your love of causes get in the way of loving other people.

There are many stories I could tell about the times I put causes over people – probably the most counterintuitive thing you can do. But for now I will tell one about a friend of mine who, in 2010, was taking up his first job at a big corporate consulting firm. So, like you, he was in a moment of great transition. I was cutting into him for joining a company, whose primary goal seemed to be helping rich people make more money.

He was smart and politically interested. Someone like him could make a real difference — I couldn't understand why he wasn't doing that. After tolerating my slander, he eventually explained that he was joining the firm because he was one of the first in his family to graduate, and under significant pressure to earn good money and support his relatives. The stakes for me of course were much lower. So I chose universities and NGOs.

Just like corporations are not necessarily packed full of ignorant profit-mongers; NGO's and social movements as it turned out were not necessarily places for purely just work. Within many of the organisations I later served, there was still elitism and ego; competition for money and a lack of real democratic participation. As it turns out, the world makes it very complicated, to live a morally-uncomplicated life.

So, while championing your causes, be sure to listen as much as you talk. Have a mind that is curious, asks genuine questions, and is open to change. Say loudly when you were wrong: we need people who can role-model what humility, listening and accountability look like. Making mistakes doesn't mean you can't lead; a lack of self-awareness does. Know when it's your time to speak up for what is just. But also when it's your time to sit down, allowing lesser-known voices to surface. It's okay to say 'I don't know', or 'I haven't thought about that' or 'I haven't decided'. You don't have to have an opinion on everything all the time. But if you do have one, don't be afraid to share it. That's how conversations start.

Choose inclusion: Everyone has a role to play in every struggle, even if the roles are different.

2. *To love something does not mean to 'like it a lot'*. Nor does it mean to approve of it, or agree with it, or endorse it. This is where our language fails us.

We say:

- 'I love chocolate'
- 'I love stumbling on a great musician I've never heard of before'
- 'I love that I only have 30-something more days of wearing school uniform'
- 'I love when a joke lands – and I do my best not to look proud – but I feel witty as hell'.

But love isn't only for the things we like. It's much more radical than this. We have a duty to love the people we disagree with – even those whose ideas and actions cut to the very core of what we deem unjust. That doesn't mean telling them how amazing they are, or inviting them for tea. It doesn't mean pretending that you are not outraged. Many of us are most outraged with people we love (particularly our parents). Loving the people we disagree with means humanising them. It's not an easy thing to do: it demands acknowledging that, rather than being foreign objects, the people that hurt or anger us are (in the grand scheme of humanity) also related to us. It means trying to understand how they came to have their particular assortment of fears and blind spots; and recognising that we too have our own collection. In my view, this is when change is most likely to happen – in other people, and in ourselves.

One of my favourite podcasters put it this way: *'I can disagree with your opinion. But I can't disagree with your experience. And now, having heard your experience, you and I are in a relationship, acknowledging the complexity of each other's position, listening less guardedly. The difference in our opinions will probably remain intact. But it no longer defines what is possible between us.'*

Since love is not about unequivocal endorsement, don't surround yourself with people that adore you all the time, or agree with everything you say. Stick with those who hold you to your best self, stretch your imagination, and give you some honest feedback, like: "Friend, right now putting up with you is like eating yoghurt with a fork. It's like going to hymn practice, realising it was a dream, and having to do it all over again. It's like having to sit on a tiny winy stool in an airport lounge, for 6 hours, because all the big lounge chairs have been taken by tiny winy children. You're that annoying. But still, I got you".

We have to learn to be honest even when it's painful; to give and receive loving, constructive criticism; and to understand that this too is a sign of love.

3. Often, the smaller and more sustained the act, the bigger the difference.

Since leaving school, I have marched through the streets, stormed Vice Chancellors' offices, pulled tables out of municipal buildings, written angry letters to the press, drafted policy documents, sat in committee meetings, created protest art... And certainly, we must keep shaking the doors of the institutions that fail us, and chip away at the systems that make this world so hostile for so many.

Yet, many of the most impactful (and most sincere) contributions I've ever made have come from much smaller, everyday acts of love: connecting to students through facilitation and peer education; mentoring young people; writing letters of recommendation; being a loyal friend; putting in effort; admitting fault; listening with no need to respond. What I've learnt about radical love is that it isn't a grand gesture, a big loud statement, or a public post. It isn't glamorous. It's a commitment, to show up for the people around you, every day, even when you don't feel like it.

If you think these small acts of love are just about feeling good inside, think again.

In 2013, I was doing research with HIV-positive adolescents in Ngqushwa, trying to understand why some of them managed to stick to their treatment and others didn't. What made the difference was not how much they knew about the treatment, or HIV, or the life-threatening consequences of missed medication. What mattered was whether they had people around them, every day, who cared. The carers feeding, reminding, scolding, and supporting these adolescents were also systematically saving their lives.

Remember those 4 out of 10 Grade 1s that never made it to matric? Research shows that if we want to decrease school drop-out, having even one attentive, caring adult supporting a child through school can make all the difference. And it need not be their family.²

Right now, millions of young South Africans are struggling to find their first job. That too is a story centuries in the making, producing an economy that is profoundly inhospitable to new job-seekers. Young people have starkly unequal chances of

² See forthcoming '[Zero Dropout](#)' 2019 Report, DG Murray Trust.

making and sustaining a livelihood. And these odds start to take shape very early in their lives.

One of the biggest factors shaping whether a young person is employed or not, is about their connections. It's about having a social network that already has currency in the world of work. Most South African companies hire someone because someone else recommended them. Yet, most young people in this country have fewer than three people they can ask for job advice. Half don't have anyone in their house who is employed.³

Be the one who systematically cares, connects, and draws people in. It's the simplest and often the most meaningful thing you can do.

4. *Lastly, the work of love, is not to become loveable.* Despite everything you were taught from the moment you were born, it's not your job to make yourself loveable. You belong to no one, but yourself. You do not have to spin yourself into an object of desire.

I've tried being perfect for the people I love.

And I've had people love me because they thought I was perfect – which really means they didn't know or love me at all.

It's an exhausting, impossible standard to maintain. And it's a trap.

When it's done right; when it includes all the most embarrassing, shameful, chaotic parts of ourselves; feeling loved is not far-off from feeling free.

When I left school, I was full of a strange mix of stubborn optimism and righteous anger. I believed we could change the world – that something close to utopia was possible. And I was furious that so many people seemed uninterested in getting us there. Now, I believe this: The world, and everyone in it, is full of mess and magic and

³ See [Youth Capital](#). August 2019. 'Shift Gears on Transition'. DG Murray Trust. See also research from [Harambee](#).

madness. It will delight and disappoint you in the same breath. And things are likely to stay that way. You, too, are full of mess and magic and madness. You will delight and disappoint yourself in the same breath. And things will likely stay that way. The challenge is to love anyway. Love better. Do this despite, and because of, all our brokenness.