

Occasional Address

Delivered by HE Mr YAMAGAMI Shingo

Ambassador of Japan to Australia

On the occasion of the College of Human and Social Futures Graduation Ceremony

Great Hall, The University of Newcastle

Wednesday 14th December 2022

Chancellor, Mr Paul Jeans

Vice-Chancellor and President, Professor Alex Zelinsky AO

Members of the University Council and staff

Families and friends

And most importantly, graduands.

Good morning.

It is both an honour and privilege to be here today for this special occasion.

I congratulate you all on the significant accomplishment of completing your degrees.

Today is the day where you trade the agony of writing essays for the agony of writing job applications.

I can see so many happy faces of the graduands and their very proud parents, family, and friends in the audience.

My staff told me one's graduation ceremony is a very important occasion here in Australia, for those graduating and their family.

So much so, it is like *Mad Max Beyond Thunderdome* to get one of the limited seats at the ceremony!

To those watching the livestream outside, I am sorry you cannot join us inside.

But I am glad you are still able to witness this very special day.

As kindly introduced, I am the Ambassador of Japan to Australia.

You must be wondering why the Japanese Ambassador is delivering the occasional address at your graduation.

To be honest, so am I!

Professor Zelinsky has many professional and personal connections with Japan, so perhaps he thought I would be an OK choice.

Joking aside, thank you Alex for giving me this precious opportunity.

It will definitely be a highlight of my time here in Australia.

For nearly 40 years now, I have worked for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

Before coming to Australia, I spent time in New York, Washington DC, Hong Kong, Geneva, and London as a diplomat for the Japanese government.

It was my long-held dream for a posting to Australia, so you can imagine how happy I was when that finally came true.

Since my arrival in late 2020, I have visited every major city of Australia many times over as well as so many far-flung place of this wide, brown land.

I have even been to places like Moranbah, Thursday Island, Broome, and the Riverland region.

Places you might struggle to find on a map!

Throughout my posting, I have found there are three things that the U.S. and the U.K. do not necessarily have that Australia does.

Splendid and moderate weather with golden sunshine, an impeccably high standard of food culture, and very friendly and down to earth people.

My wife, Kaoru and I have received very warm welcomes wherever we have visited, making our time in Australia that extra bit special.

Much of this has to do with the fact that Japan and Australia have become each other's best friend in the Indo-Pacific region.

Despite the challenges of COVID-19, our two prime ministers have met on four occasions in just five months!

As you may recall, Prime Minister Albanese's first official overseas visit was to Japan, straight after being sworn in as PM.

He even jokes that he meets with Prime Minister Kishida more often than state and territory leaders!

They must be envious of the fantastic relationship Japan and Australia share.

And I am very proud to have the privilege of being the Japanese Ambassador to this *Great Southern Land*.

When I was asked to speak today, I got thinking about the journey you will soon embark on.

And three Japanese proverbs came to mind that I would like to share with you today.

Proverb One:

「七転び八起き」 (*Nanakorobi Yaoki*)

'Fall down seven times, get up eight'

This proverb speaks to the Japanese concept of resilience.

Stepping onto campus this morning brought back bittersweet memories to me.

On a very cold morning in 1974, a young Shingo stood in front of the noticeboard of a selective junior high school in Tokyo.

Only days before he had sat the entrance exam, and he was there with his parents to check the results.

Young Shingo had long dreamed of attending this school, so there he was searching for his name on the list of those who passed the exam.

Over and over again he checked the list, but his name wasn't there.

And so he just stood there, desperately holding back his tears.

He was so upset and disappointed in himself, he cried for a whole week.

And he blamed his poor mother for not putting him into private tutoring earlier.

I really feel sorry for my mother who now at 93 years old still remembers this incident very clearly.

Fast forward to six years later, a young Shingo – now 18 – would go on to sit the even more difficult entrance exams of the University of Tokyo.

So determined to pass, he gave up everything to prepare.

Even his beloved baseball.

Locking himself away to study like a monk in training.

When his crush gave him some chocolates for Valentine's Day, he did not even ask her out.

What a waste!

Because remember, he was like a trainee monk and dating was out of the question!

Then came a beautiful spring day in April of 1980, where Shingo together with his parents would attend the entrance ceremony at the University of Tokyo under the blooming cherry blossoms.

Later on in 1983, Shingo would go on to sit the exams to join the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan.

Now it might seem like my life has been all about exams.

So I will stop with the exam talk now that you are graduating, because I am sure the last thing you want to hear about is more exams!

What I will say is this; no matter how many times life knocks you down, get right back up.

Choose to never give up hope, and always strive for more.

You might be wondering how you could possibly get up eight times when you only fall seven times.

Don't worry about the math.

Just remember that getting back up is more important.

Proverb Two:

「井の中の蛙、大海を知らず」 (*Ino naka no kawazu taikai wo shirazu*)

A frog in a well knows nothing of the great ocean

Picture a little frog just going about its life in a well.

Lacking the courage to get out and see what is beyond that well, he stays and spends his entire life there.

If you stay within the confines of your comfort zone, you will lose the chance to know of the big wonderful world out there.

Many of my colleagues in the Japanese foreign service devote their whole lives working for the ministry.

Just like a frog in a well.

However, I am the odd one out.

I went on secondment three times each to a different organisation.

The first was to the Cabinet Secretariat.

The second was to the Prefectural Police in Ibaraki.

And the third was to the largest Japanese think-tank, the Japan Institute of International Affairs.

These secondments were not my choice, by the way.

Perhaps I was not well liked by my superiors.

These roles were quite different to what I was used to or even trained to do.

Don't get me wrong; adapting to a new environment on three separate occasions challenged me to the very core.

To the point where I wanted to quit and go back to the comfort of the well.

But these were opportunities for this little frog to leave the well that was the foreign ministry and see the great ocean.

Looking back, the time I spent outside of the foreign service was incredibly memorable.

Especially the time I spent at the Ibaraki Police as Deputy Chief.

I even trained in using firearms alongside other police officers.

Although it was nothing like what you see in the movies, it definitely was an experience to remember!

I learned many things as well.

We toiled together.

Cried together.

And laughed together on numerous occasions.

The Police Agency worked as one: six thousand personnel sticking together as a team to uphold the law and protect its citizens.

This particular opportunity of being in the police force did bear witness to tragedy and sadness.

Nonetheless, it was an opportunity to grow both professionally and personally.

I still get a warm welcome from my old colleagues in the police force – friendships I hold dearly to this day.

So wherever life takes you after graduation, remember there is a great ocean out there, teeming with opportunities.

Refuse to be content of just being a frog in the well.

Even if you are the top frog of that well, leap out and see where life takes you.

Perhaps it may lead you to Japan!

As the Japanese Ambassador, I cannot waste an opportunity to promote Japan to Aussie friends!

The Japanese government offers a number of opportunities to young graduates like you, such as the Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme and the MEXT Scholarship.

You will need an undergraduate degree to apply.

So congratulations – you are qualified from today!

Proverb Three:

「歳月人を待たず」 (*Saigetsu hito wo matazu*)

'Tide and time wait for no one'

This proverb tells us time passes quickly.

And time will flow without regard for human convenience.

We cannot simply hit pause.

In other words, make each and every day count, and use your time wisely.

Even though I have passed the milestone of turning 60, I still feel very young.

But I tell myself every day that “today could be my last”.

And so, I live my life to the fullest and try to be the best version of myself.

Being an ambassador is no easy task.

You are a highly ranked representative of your country on diplomatic assignment.

And we all know how important assignments are!

When I arrived in Australia, I hit the ground running.

I had to move with the time or get swept up in the tide.

Nothing will come your way if you just sit around, even as an ambassador.

So I got to work.

Attending countless meetings, discussions, seminars, receptions, dinners, and events.

Meeting leaders in government, business, academia, and the community.

Promoting the strong and robust ties, and of course the friendship, between Australia and Japan at every chance I get.

Crisscrossing the country as I do so.

The accounts section of the Japanese embassy in Canberra must be sick and tired of asking Tokyo for additional funds!

It serves a strategic purpose, I say.

Establishing and strengthening networks, and disseminating and gathering information, the right information, are crucial to diplomacy.

I once worked as the director of an intelligence agency in Japan, and believe me when I say information does not come one's way so easily!

Whatever you choose to do from this day forward, I encourage you to do your best and strive to make a difference – no matter how small.

Before I conclude, I would like to offer one more piece of advice in the form of another Japanese proverb.

「孝行のしたい時分には親はなし」 (*Koko no shitai jibun ni wa oya wa nashi*)

'When we are able to repay our parents, they are no longer with us'

Through all of my ups and downs, my mother and father have stood by my side.

They allowed me to dream and taught me perseverance and resilience.

Today, your loved ones – parents, grandparents, extended family, and friends, surround you.

Whoever they are, be sure to thank them.

Fortunately, my parents are still here.

And I will never forget my parents' happy tears at my entrance ceremony for Tokyo Uni.

To all of you graduating today, well done on your hard work and achievements.

You should be very proud, as you have worked many years to reach this point.

Inquisitiveness is your passport to everything on this journey called 'Life'.

So take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way, and know that the future is something we make.

And remember;

'Fall down seven times, get up eight';

'A frog in a well knows nothing of the great ocean';

And 'Time and tide wait for no one'.

Congratulations again on your graduation.

I wish you happiness, good health, and every success.

Thank you very much and congratulations!