Brenda Gourley
2011

Laudatio
DANCING WITH HISTORY

At a solemn ceremony to mark the investiture of an honorary doctor, it is unusual for the president of the university to act as orator. The UOC is an atypical university, however, and today is another example of that.

Thus, exceptionally, I shall be taking on a reduced role today, carrying out the delicate task of attempting to adequately describe Professor Brenda Gourley in an oration to such a unique figure, someone whom I profoundly admire and respect. I shall be leaving the task of delivering the closing speech to another internationally renowned figure, the Government of Catalonia’s current Minister for the Economy and Knowledge, Andreu Mas Collell, someone who shares our interest in academia and science, and whom we are lucky enough to have here among us in his capacity as a member of the government and Chairman of our Board of Trustees.

My reasons for giving this oration stem from the fact that Brenda Gourley has been and remains an example and a source of inspiration for me. Like her, I often feel that I am swimming against the tide. Contrary to what might be expected, I do not find that to be disagreeable but rather a stimulus for my creativity.

African, female and white, Brenda Gourley has spent most of her life in South Africa. Born in Johannesburg, she grew up and studied under a repressive regime, where the concept of freedom was a dream and a cause for which many people suffered and died. My generation and I also spent our adolescent years in a socially and politically hostile environment, and therefore have a very good idea of what that entails and the depth of the scars it leaves behind. Like Professor Gourley, we have also felt the satisfaction of seeing a dream come true... and are aware of what that means, something that it is difficult to put into words and explain to those fortunate enough not to have had to struggle to achieve such a goal.

A chartered accountant, Professor Gourley was the only female in a class of 500 students and thus has the distinction of having been a trailblazer in her profession. After the first of her four children was born, she ceased working in the private sector, opting instead for the academic life. She thus began a new career as a part-time tutor in financial accounting...
at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. She went on to become Dean of the institution’s Faculty of Economics and Enterprise before being appointed the university’s Vice-Chancellor in 1994, the first time a woman had held such a post in South Africa.

During her time as Vice-Chancellor, which coincided with a period of electrifying change in South Africa, she steered the university towards a transformation of historic proportions. As an institution, the University of KwaZulu-Natal needed to realise and acknowledge that many of its strategies and practices from the days of apartheid were unacceptable and undignified. There was actually what Professor Gourley calls “a curious anomaly of apartheid” at the university. While the government had decreed that “white” universities may not admit black students, the University of KwaZulu-Natal had a “black” medical school that did not accept white students. For decades, it was the only university in the country at which black students could become doctors. Nonetheless, and for obvious reasons, the medical school’s students felt that they were victims of discrimination and exclusion, and one of the ways in which they expressed their discontent was by boycotting graduation ceremonies. That regrettable situation prompted the university, under Brenda Gourley’s magnificent leadership, to embark upon a process of reconciliation. The first step consisted of holding a reconciliatory function at which students who had boycotted the aforementioned ceremonies could graduate symbolically. It was there that Professor Gourley publically apologised, on behalf of her institution, for the mistakes of the past. Ever since then, the medical school has been named after Nelson Mandela.

I have mentioned the function in question for illustrative purposes. The reconciliation process was indisputably far more complex and went on for much longer. A mere ceremony cannot bring about an instant cure. However, it undoubtedly succeeded in beginning a healing process and unequivocally showing that the country’s future could involve dignity for all. Professor Gourley concluded her speech at the function with some words adapted from President Mandela’s inaugural address, and I would like to repeat them today: “never, never and never again shall it be that this university will experience the oppression and hurt of one by another”.

Professor Gourley thus has first-hand experience of the deep wound that apartheid inflicted on South Africa and which, as Mandela himself has remarked on several occasions, will take many years, generations even, to heal.

Some peoples heal their wounds by forgetting. Others do so through acceptance, forgiveness and reconciliation. The future will show which of the two approaches constitutes the most solid foundation to build upon. Brenda has previously observed that South Africa is not unique in terms of its problems, but is in terms of how and the speed at which it resolves them.

In 1999, Brenda Gourley wrote “South Africa is an extraordinary country in which to live. What makes it extraordinary at this period in its history is that virtually every law, policy, rule and way of doing things is being changed”. Those words sum up her outlook on life. She sees a creative challenge where others only see inconveniences.

Professor Gourley experienced the cruel world of apartheid. She also had the good fortune to witness its end. I have a lasting memory of photographs hanging on the wall in Professor Gourley’s house, showing her embracing Nelson Mandela.

At this point, I would like to mention that, during his long confinement in prison on Robben Island, Mandela, as a jurist, often offered prisoners and prison staff legal advice and liked to share his knowledge with his fellow inmates. His belief in education and teaching made the prison a place of learning, and it became popularly known as the Nelson Mandela University.

Brenda Gourley began working at the age of 18. She was therefore a part-time student, as her father had been, and as 40% of English students are. It was perhaps with that in mind that, in 2002, as Vice-Chancellor of The Open University, she succeeded in placing the issue of part-time education on the agenda of every political party in Great Britain.

The Open University is regarded as one of Britain’s most prestigious universities, despite a third of its 150,000 students having been admitted with qualifications that do not meet other British universities’ entry requirements. The Open University accepts such students as it prioritises the abilities and skills they will have acquired upon completion of their
courses over the qualifications they hold when beginning their studies. Professor Gourley took on quite a challenge, one that, in the light of the results achieved, clearly shows that it is possible to do things differently.

Brenda Gourley was Vice-Chancellor of The Open University from 2002 to the end of 2010. She is a member of South Africa’s Council for Scientific and Industrial Research and of the Association of Commonwealth Universities. Dividing her time between two continents, Africa and Europe, she has been and still is a member of many public and private boards, a non-executive director of SAGE and a tireless speaker on the role of higher education as a guarantee of social justice, as well as on higher education’s necessary transformation in the digital world. She is an advocate of the open content movement. Under her guidance, The Open University was the first British institution of its kind to offer open access to some of its materials. Like the members of the UOC community, she sees ICTs as a source of tremendous opportunities to achieve the unachievable and as powerful tools that can help people radically change their lives. In Africa, ICTs are crucial to empowering people, particularly in the case of women, although the relationship between women, empowerment and ICTs in the continent is complex, as most African women are a long way from achieving freedom.

‘Global’, ‘open’, ‘action’, ‘passion’, ‘commitment’, ‘transformation’, ‘social justice’ and ‘personal dignity’ are ideas that Brenda’s name evokes. They are all values that I admire and, as far as possible, try to make my own, as I am sure that, given our belief in the role of knowledge as an instrument for transformation, we both share Mandela’s view that “education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world”. I imagine that she would agree with me in adding that applying ICTs to education makes the weapon more powerful and, thus, increases the likelihood of achieving such change.

It was not I but Professor Gourley who coined the title of this oration. I have used it by way of tribute, and also as a metaphor for her outlook on life. Brenda Gourley has not resigned herself to the history through which she has lived, nor has she fought bitterly against it... she dances with history, but not to a rhythm marked by resignation, conformism and regret. She dances one step at a time, in a precise fashion, aware of where her feet are and how to move them. She dances to the rhythm of a waltz.

In conferring the highest academic distinction upon Professor Brenda Gourley, our aim is to offer a tangible expression of our great admiration and gratitude. Gratitude to a person who has not just directed a university, but has succeeded in making a far-reaching commitment to education. Thank you, Brenda, and welcome to our community.

Imma Tubella i Casadevall
President of the UOC

Barcelona, 24 February 2011