

Robert Hannaford
Honorary Doctorate Acceptance Speech 2024

I would like to begin by acknowledging the Chancellor – Mr John Hood, Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor – Professor Romy Lawson, Vice President and Executive Dean - Professor Deborah West, University Council members, University staff, the family and friends of graduates and most especially, you the graduates.

Apologies for my voice – it has been affected by throat surgery.

I wish to thank the Flinders University community for conferring this award on me.

It was certainly unexpected.

But it is much appreciated.

I need to thank the university for something else.

My very first official portrait commission was of Mark Mitchell – the university's first Chancellor. That commission began for me a very happy transaction with society, that of doing something I love and being paid for it.

My passion then, was to draw and paint the world. I had tried art school, but in those days it didn't teach what I wanted, so I began teaching myself. It was the 1960s, anything was possible!

I have noticed, that when one is passionate about something, things seem to naturally fall into place. This has happened to me.

Certain people, books and situations came my way. Firstly, I met and worked with Hugo Shaw and Des Hurcombe, two outstanding Adelaide artists. Later I met Hans Heysen and Ivor Hele. These great South Australia artists were willing to pass on their extensive knowledge and understanding of the art of representing the visual world. This learning continues with every drawing, painting and sculpture I do.

Love of nature, is the main reason I became a painter and then a conservationist. Here again, I was fortunate in meeting John Smyth, a man of great love and knowledge of the natural world. Together we formed two conservation companies in the 1970s - Bushland Conservation Company and Hester's Conservation Company. Our purpose was to preserve, in all of its diversity, parts of this wonderful land on which we live, here in South Australia. This is something I am unequivocally proud to be part of.

Contact with the Ngadjuri, the first people of my region of South Australia has been a constant source of inspiration and understanding of our place in the natural world.

The greatest influence in my life now is my wife, Alison Mitchell, she with her unerring sense of the truth brings to my life a sense of connectedness for which I feel blessed. That, and the support of family and friends.

It's traditional at this point for me to say something to you, the graduates, as you leave university for the wide world. A world full of challenges. Not least of which is climate change and the threat of nuclear weapons. Life on earth is contingent on how we respond to these challenges. I notice that today you are graduates from psychology, education and social work. All of which will place you at the very centre of influence in enabling positive outcomes. Naturally then, I wish you great success.

One other thing. My life in painting has impressed upon me the truth of the statement that we see the world through our mind's eye, not what is actually there. To experience this, I therefore encourage you to try to draw something very accurately. It doesn't matter what previous drawing experience you may have had. Draw the exact shape you see and then the exact tone – by tone I mean the relative darkness and lightness, and then draw the true colour, here I mean paying particular attention to the relative warmth and coolness. This action can be so compelling that for a moment thinking is subdued and you can 'see' with unusual clarity. It is worth a try!

Congratulations again and good luck