

**UTS Law Alumna, Ms Caroline Vu's Occasional Address at the Law Awards
Ceremony, 7 June 2017**

Thank you and thank you for inviting me to join you tonight for this wonderful celebration.

I want to acknowledge this land's traditional owners, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. Aboriginal people have been on this land for 50,000 years, yet we still have so much to learn about the complex economic and legal systems created by these early cultures. We draw on the wisdom and resilience of these communities, particularly as Australia's modern legal system continues to evolve, and so it's in that context I pay my respect to Elders, past, and present and any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here with us tonight.

Good evening Professor Hitchens, staff, alumni, supporters and friends of UTS Law – and of course, the reason we're here tonight – the students. Congratulations on your truly inspiring accolades. I wish I had been half as studious and diligent as you all when I was at uni!

It's an honour to be back on campus for an occasion like this and I do owe a lot to UTS. I met my husband Marc here almost thirteen years ago in the courtyard between the Law and Business Faculties, apparently when I was trying to persuade him to vote in the student association elections.

I've been asked to reflect tonight on my career and civic engagement. While I wouldn't describe my path as linear, there has been a golden thread or question throughout: how can I create the greatest, positive and lasting impact at this moment in time, with what I have available? I've pendulum'd from activist, to commercial, to non-profit and now what I believe is the perfect alignment of my passions, skills and the impact I want to have.

The story of my own journey to impact doesn't start with me, but with my parents. They came to Australia as students from Vietnam on the Colombo Plan in the 60s (before the war). As the refugees began arriving in Australia, they worked to settle many people over the next decade, even at a time they were coming to grips with being stateless themselves. As a result, my sister and I inherited a deep commitment to social justice, and a responsibility to make something of our privilege.

So the moment in time I met Marc and tried to get him to vote in the elections, I was experimenting with many different channels of enacting change from activism and protesting, to sitting at the table with University Council trying to find the best path forward for the most number of stakeholders. I learnt what leadership looked like from courageous, bold lecturers who didn't just teach us the curriculum, who didn't shy away from hard conversations when September 11 and the Tampa happened, but helped us understand our role and responsibility in civil society as advocates, and soon-to-be practitioners in the justice system.

I practised as a commercial solicitor at Pigott Stinson, a boutique firm, now over 150 years old. I learnt some of the most important lessons in my life here, from some of the most brilliant legal minds. I learnt that knowing the 'right', textbook, answer did not mean you were the best lawyer. The most valued and trusted advisors always delved into commercial realities, explored what was driving the stakeholders, and sought to engineer an alternative to the zero-sum game. I learnt that often the most important step was not knowing the answer – but the right question to ask.

On that topic, I was increasingly asking myself at the time how I could make a more tangible difference, and what was important to me. I didn't articulate it like this then, but if you haven't already, I implore you to ask yourself a question – especially as you are preparing to enter the workforce – how much is enough? What do you need – and I mean an actual dollar figure – to live comfortably, and to have financial security? One of the great challenges of our time is that comparison can become the death of happiness, and we can quite easily keep raising the bar our whole lives in terms of what we think we need. The freedom that comes from identifying what is enough is immense – the alternative is that the accumulation of wealth, and 'stuff', can be limitless, and can often make it harder for us to connect with what we truly need, where we really find meaning.

The next phase of my career took me completely out of my comfort zone. This adventure was enabled by two lawyers – a former Allens lawyer Louise Walsh who gave me the break of my career, by trusting her gut about who I was and my potential, even though I didn't have a lick of direct experience for the role I'd applied for. This was a crucial lesson for me, especially as I began to build teams myself, to look for generic skills and attributes, and not underestimating or pigeon holing anyone based on what they studied, or their last job. The second was Mike Gonski, my partner in crime for over four years. Mike and I co-founded a network of emerging entrepreneurs, executives and leaders in philanthropy, who wanted to use not just their dollars, but their skills, resources and networks, to make a difference. We helped them connect to their passion and purpose – that same question about creating the greatest impact with what's available. We created a community to support them, and gave them access to the best in the world to learn from – people like the Gates Foundation, and ebay founder Pierre Omidyar's team.

Both Mike and Louise pushed me to become an entrepreneur, and create something from scratch. As Brene Brown says (quoting Roosevelt), to step into the arena and fall short and short again in the pursuit of creating something that we knew had true and lasting value not just for these leaders, but ultimately for wider society.

Which brings me to now. I work in a family of businesses focused on using investment dollars to solve some of the most pressing issues for the ↑ planet (like climate change, resilient food systems) and humanity (like creating an abundance of empathy, and a new economy that benefits all stakeholders). A lot of my time is spent in a funds management business, IIG which invests in sustainable real estate, solar farms and early stage companies. Ten years ago, I honestly never imagined working in finance, nor being in a role called Chief Impact Officer (I highly doubt such a role even existed!). The writer, Alice Walker, said something when she was here recently that resonated with me: “when times get scary, form circles of trust”. The incredible privilege and serendipity for me is that not only am I doing the best work of my life but I'm doing it with people I love and admire.

And isn't that lucky, because times **are** scary. I'm scared about what happens now that the US has pulled out of the Paris Agreement. I'm scared about whether the violence in London and Paris and Melbourne and Aleppo makes me more fearful to trust people, whether it will diminish my compassion and desensitise me to our shared humanity. Some days are overwhelming.

And so I come back to what I can influence, with what I have available. When you have some quiet time for reflection, I'd love you to explore that for yourself. Key to that inquiry is knowing what the world looks like that you want future generations to inherit, connecting to

what your passions are, what your super powers are. What will emerge with time is a clear sense of what and how you can contribute uniquely to the world. I've found that purpose has been a compass in my life.

And if that feels overwhelming, you can start with something I learnt from Marc's example early on: strive to be a good human. Lead by example in every interaction you have with others. Be kind. Strengthen your empathy muscle. Practice gratitude - daily. Be curious about the world and people. Continually hone your skills of self-awareness, of truly knowing yourself – I've found this to be one of the most crucial attributes in leadership. Practice humility and experiment with how it co-exists with strength. Be courageous, not in the absence of fear, but in spite of it.

I'll close with a quote from Krista Tippett, creator of the beautiful podcast *On Being*: The measure of wisdom is the imprint that a life makes on other lives around it.

Wishing you wisdom, courage and a full life of passion and purpose.