

A SENSE OF PURPOSE

*Opening Academic Year Rijks Universiteit Groningen
Speech, Carolien de Bruin (Founder & CEO C-Change)
September 3rd 2018*

Dear Dean, dear Members of the Board, Faculty, Students, City of Groningen,

I am honored to be here today to kick off this Academic Year with you, and of course delighted to be celebrated as Alumna of the Year 2018. Twenty two years after I arrived here in 1996. [Has it really been that long?]

To be selected out of the tens of thousands of students that have walked through your hallways, that immersed in theory and applied practice, that have slept in your libraries, and crawled home after a late night out, is a true honor.

Truth be told. Receiving this nomination, came as quite a surprise. Not just for me, but also for those around me. I vividly remember my partner's reaction when I called him with the news: "Didn't the founder of the dating app Inner Circle through which we met, also study in Groningen"? [In other words: Were you really all they could come up with?]

Clearly, I will not have received this nomination because of my matchmaking ability. Nor for the size of C-Change, the social enterprise that I started three years back, or - for that matter – because of the balance of my bank account.

In December 2017, Larry Fink, CEO of BlackRock, one of the largest money managers in the world wrote the companies that he had invested in a letter that he titled 'A Sense of Purpose'¹. In this letter he asked them to think beyond pure financials. To, in their production, minimize waste and recycle material. To deliver positive, long-term value to their customers and to the communities they worked in. He reminded these CEOs that, having wealth, and being in a position of power, came with a responsibility towards people and planet. Fink is joining a growing, but to this day marginal, cadre of leaders that recognizes the need to 'rethink business as usual'.

We live in a tumultuous time. Not only Groningen is – literally – shaking on its feet. The rest of the world is as well. Today, close to 100 million people are displaced across the globe. Most of them live in dire conditions. And although close to 1 billion people were lifted out of poverty since the 90's, nearly half of the world's population – more than 3 billion people - live on less than \$2.50/day. The vast majority of these people will never get out of poverty and – unlike us – do not have the opportunity to live their full potential.²

Environmentally, we are approaching the point of no return³: Over 30% percent of the world's species face

¹ <https://www.blackrock.com/corporate/investor-relations/larry-fink-ceo-letter>

² <https://www.economist.com/international/2017/03/30/the-world-has-made-great-progress-in-eradicating-extreme-poverty>

³ <https://newatlas.com/climate-change-point-of-no-return-global-warming/56153/>

extinction by mid-century. We are falling behind on the climate targets that were set in Paris in 2015, while a melting Arctic poses a direct threat, not in the least to our Dutch shores. And the list goes on. The water has, quite literally, risen up to our necks.

My point: The future of next generations – your future – is not guaranteed if we do not change things drastically. If we do not challenge conventions. If we do not – once and for all – build a water-tight case for change. Making money is a goal – and a very important one, as I would add as a startup entrepreneur – yet, it is not all encompassing, and ultimately a means to an end. We should not serve our economy, our economy should serve us, sustainably.

It's not all doom and gloom. We have come a long way and have the most amazing innovations, technologies, data, and insights at our finger tips that can be brought to bear. And – as Elmer stressed earlier – there is a plan. In 2015, world leaders from all sectors signed off on 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the SDG's. Together with the Paris Climate Act, these targets form an umbrella framework that everyone can tie their work and strategies to. This is fixable. We can still turn the tide:

Yet we need you, students and academics, to hold society and today's decision-makers accountable to change its ways. We need your talent. We need your energy.

Students:

- Make yourself heard: Al Gore in his movie *An Inconvenient Sequel*⁴ called on each of us to 'speak truth to power and fight as if our world depends on it'. Because it does. As we just heard, there is no Planet B. Ask questions, challenge conventions, and make your vote count.
- Fill your 'professional back pack' with the insights, management, research, and collaborative skills that will allow you to kick ass in a few years. This is the biggest 'change management' effort of our time and we need you to bring your A-game when you get out of School
- And when you enter the job market, reward the organizations that do make a difference with your talent.

And faculty: Support your students. Work with them to be the critical thinkers that we need. Bring the evidence base we need in a world full of 'fake news'. And perhaps most importantly: I know that Groningen takes pride in its 'nuchterheid'. [It says something that there is not really a word for this in English]. Embrace this value. Yet, also use opportunities like the opening of the Climate Adaptation Centre later this year with former Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon to establish the 'Stanford of the Lage der Aa' as my economics professor in Groningen would always jokingly say. During my MBA at Columbia University in New York, I learned a lot. I also learned that the quality of Dutch education is right up there with the Ivy League Schools. Yet, as a country, and as a schooling system, we really do need to be willing to think and act bigger. [And I recognize that this may be a particularly pointed remark to make today, but ...] Get out there. Celebrate risk-taking. Celebrate failure. Identify and pursue the bold agendas and solutions that are critical to our planet and overall 21st century success.

Enough about you. Let's talk about me. You already know that I met my love online. [How 21st century is that.] You also know that my career did not bring me the riches that bring me to Necker Island every month like our friend Richard Branson. What you may have been able to tell from my story however, is that I am on

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=huX1bmfdkyA>

a mission. On a crazy mission to trigger, but also to equip businesses, investors, and other organizations to make a change. Not just a little bit of change, but a ‘sea change’: Disruptive change that will lead to a sustainable future for all.

In a few weeks, Klaas Knot, President of the Dutch Central Bank, RuG alumnus, and a pioneer in sustainability, speaks at your EBF Conference. In 2016, C-Change presented a national SDG investment roadmap to the Central Bank and Cabinet on behalf of the Dutch financial sector. Together, we called on them to take bold action and forge a ‘new, sustainable, normal’ in capital markets. A first in the world, and an exercise that we are now repeating in Jordan and Kenya as we speak. This is what I mean with triggering change and equipping different actors to up their game.

Being able to pursue my *purpose*, my calling, or my North Star, has meant the world for my path and happiness so far. I am guessing that this may be why I am here today. Just this weekend, President Obama, in his eulogy for John McCain reminded us that the only way to make your mark on the world is to commit to something bigger than yourself. I have always felt this to be the case. It is sometimes huge pain in the butt. But having that sense of purpose makes the difference. The difference between a life lived, or lost.

Back to earth. As part of this talk, I was invited to channel my inner Steve Jobs, and to ‘inspire you to aspire greatness’. I hope I checked that box. I was also asked to share a few personal lessons that may help you on your own path.

To stay true to my conviction that recycling matters [or as you’d say in the academic world, plagiarism], let me take advantage of the ‘tegeltjeswijscheden’ and commencement speeches that resonated with me over the years. So here you go. My five simple truths, much more eloquently put than I could ever phrase them myself:

1. **Purpose** – The most important advice I can give you, is to think about what makes you happy. About what you are good at. What you’d like to look back to when you’re old and grey. It can be anything. A complex mathematical formula, politics in the 16th century, or the impact of sheep poo on large plants⁵ – the PhD topic of one my best friends in Groningen and still one of my closest friends today. Find your passion, and you will be just fine.
2. **Dream** – A few years back, I sat down at a café in Cape Town, South Africa. I had given up my well-paid job in New York, and the ‘security of identity’ that I had had of being an Associate Partner at a large consulting firm. I was thrilled, yet terrified with what would lie ahead. It was right in that moment that I read on a tile on the wall: *If your dreams don’t scare you, they’re not big enough*. The tile, to this day, reminds me to keep dreaming.
3. **Be microambitious** – My C-Change dream is to create a ‘LinkedIn for Impact’ that would be used by thousands of social businesses across the world to attract the capital they need to succeed. To become a real ‘impact unicorn’. Awesome. Yet, how to create a workplan around that? Tim Minchin⁶, an Australian comedian, called for the ‘passionate pursuit of short-term goals’. His words: *Be micro-ambitious, put your head down, and work with pride on whatever is in front of you*. I struggle with this daily, yet, being able to turn big ideas into small tasks often forms the line between success and failure.

⁵ http://tuprints.ulb.tu-darmstadt.de/epda/000948/thesis_s.c.wessels.pdf

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yoEezD71sc&feature=youtu.be>

4. **Dare to Fail** – Use your years inside the safety of your student days, to experiment and fail. When I studied in Groningen, I applied to become one of the first female rectors of my student association in its history. I did not get the role and was incredibly disappointed. [Better at the time. As Vindicat wasn't quite ready to become a social enterprise. In hindsight, perhaps a scenario worth considering. In any case ...] This is what J.K. Rowling said in her Harvard commencement speech about failure: '*You might be driven by a fear of failure quite as much as a desire for success. It is impossible to live without, unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all.*' University and in many ways the 'bubble' in which you have the luxury of living for a while, is the perfect environment to experiment in. To take risk. To start a business. To lead. And to fail.
5. **Be OK to be 'trumped'** – When you do fail, or when things don't go as you'd like them go. Don't beat yourself up about it. Last week, I happened to land on a TV documentary that followed a student, trying to land a room in Amsterdam. It took me back to the time that I arrived in Groningen, energized, but definitely also intimidated by the need to be cool, funny, confident, and pretty at the same time. Without any sleep, suffering from an eye infection, and definitely not as witty as the girls that walked in with me, it took me a little while to find my own. My point: Try to be OK with the fact that sometimes you will be be outwitted, outsmarted, or trumped by someone. [And while sometimes hiding in your pillow may be the best micro-ambitious next step on the table, there will always be another day, and your time *will* come.]

Let me close with this: Paul Polman, the world's 'poster child for purpose'⁷ and RuG alumnus, recently announced that he will step down as CEO at Unilever. In a 2016 interview he was quoted as saying: "*It shouldn't be difficult to find someone better than me. The bench of purpose-driven leaders runs wide and deep*". Consider this your call to action: You are our bench. And we need you to be ready to lead in just a few years. Until then: Celebrate life, enjoy the bubble, or of course – send me your resume – as we always need great interns to join our team.

Thank you.

⁷ https://www.sustainablebrands.com/news_and_views/leadership/aaron_pickering/purpose_after_polman_how_poster_child_paved_way_fu