

Speech at graduation ceremony to master students

May 29, 2020

Marina Svensson

This is our first, and we hope last, experience of a graduation ceremony practicing social distancing. Although we are missing the larger event we usually have, we are very pleased to have been able to organise this smaller event, and that your family, friends, and first years students, can join and watch the live streaming.

My warmest congratulations to those of you who have now defended your thesis and thus completed the master programme! And for those who still have to finish their thesis, I am confident that you will, and wish you good luck as you proceed with your work.

These are difficult and uncertain times but you should all be proud that you have been able to persist with your studies.

Although the ending of your stay in Lund has been very different, I hope that you have fun memories, and that your studies at the Centre have been both exciting and transformative.

We hope to see you in Lund again, and that you stay in touch with each other and with us through our alumni network!

As students and scholars we are used to uncertainties, although not of the magnitude we are facing today. In fact, as many scholars and philosophers from different schools of thought would point out, uncertainty is a natural and unavoidable part of life, as we can't control everything that happens to us.

Uncertainty is also what motivates research.

Like many others, the covid-19 pandemic has led me to think about how we as individuals, institutions, and nations deal with uncertainties and how we can learn to cope with them. These are complex epistemic, societal, and deeply personal questions.

I think many people, particularly those who are not trained in academic critical thinking or in science, have difficulties to deal with the rapidly shifting, and diverging, information and advice during the past months.

Most people want clear-cut answers: how dangerous is the virus, who is at risk, when will there be a vaccine, and will it work, what are the best methods to control the pandemic, and why are

different experts telling us different things, and why do they change their answers and views over time. Many also want answers about the socio-economic and political consequences of the pandemic. To be told that there are no certain answers, or that one can only give tentative and preliminary answers, and that these will change as new information becomes available, can be bewildering and create a lot of anxiety.

But this is how scientists and scholars work, dealing with uncertainty, facing changing information, piecing together sometimes contradictory information from available data, re-evaluating this in the light of new data, and so in the process adjusting one's views.

Knowledge is thus always piecemeal, open to dispute, need to be fact checked, and very much a process with an uncertain outcome.

I like this quote, not related to covid-19, by Stephen Holden from 2015 in *The Conversation*, "Research may help reduce uncertainty, but it can never provide certainty. Research is an errorful process that peers into an obscure reality." Maybe he is overstating it a bit. He also argues that "an important role for researchers is to stand up for uncertainty." As students and scholars we are, at least some of us, or some of the time, fairly comfortable with saying things like "I don't know," "this is an understudied topic," "this is not the topic of my research/falls outside of my expertise," or "this is a good question but I don't have a clear answer."

As good students and scholars we thus need to maintain a degree of healthy scepticism, acting both as "a doubtful scholars" and as "a humble scholars," as discussed by the philosopher Pierre Le Morvan. In order to be this kind of scholar we need to be open to challenges to our own views and current knowledge and humble enough to realize that we are always in a state of constant learning and constant uncertainty.

What we need, as some scholars and scientists have also argued, is not only an academic community, or a university, but also a society that is comfortable with doubt and uncertainty among scholars and politicians, and also openly acknowledges this. In fact, a recent study from Cambridge University, "The Effects of Communicating Uncertainty on Public Trust in Facts and Numbers," found that people are ok with uncertainty as long as scholars/politicians are honest and transparent about it. The study studied people's reactions to epistemic uncertainty, i.e. things we don't know about the past and present but in theory could come to know, through measurement, and in the next phase they will be researching

perceptions of what is called aleatory uncertainty — unknowns about the future due to randomness, indeterminacy, chance or luck.

I hope you have learnt to deal with at least some uncertainties as students during the master programme, particularly when working on your master thesis, and that you understand that knowledge is a long process that requires patience, persistence, and humbleness.

In these times many of us are worried about loved one's health and our own immediate futures, as well as face uncertainties related to the situation in higher education, the job market, the global economy, and the political consequences of the pandemic.

We're all different in how much uncertainty we can tolerate in our personal lives but we can all learn to be better at adapting to and facing uncertainties, overcome challenges, and increase our resilience. There is a lot of advice out there on how to deal with worries and uncertainties so that they don't have a negative impact on our well-being. Different people find different tools and techniques useful, ranging from mindfulness to walking, or a combination of the two, which is my best tip.

We might not all have the same mind-sets as Zen masters but I think there is something to learn from them. They often talk about three factors that need to be cultivated along the path (of wisdom/life): great faith, great doubt, and great courage. According to Stephen Batchelor in *The Faith to Doubt: Glimpses of Buddhist Uncertainty*, doubt "...means to keep alive the perplexity at the heart of our life, to acknowledge that fundamentally we don't know what is going on, to question whatever arises within us." "Faith is the condition of ultimate confidence that we have the capacity to follow the path of doubt to its end. And courage is the strength needed to be true to ourselves under all conditions..."

I hope you will have faith when facing doubt and have the courage to deal with uncertainties in life and work in the future.

There is a danger that the pandemic will bring people apart, not only because of social distancing, but more worryingly due to the closing of borders, fear of others and the virus, and that we will see the rise of xenophobia and nationalism. But having had classmates and teachers from different parts of the world, and having studied and experienced new cultures and countries throughout the master programme, I trust you have learnt important intercultural skills and developed a commitment to cosmopolitanism and tolerance. With inter-cultural skills you become more tolerant of others, of different views, and different cultural practices and worldviews,

which is a big asset and something worth safeguarding in today's world.

We don't want the current uncertainties to lead to intolerance, fear, and xenophobia, but hope that the way we as individuals and communities deal with the uncertainties today rather will breed tolerance, humbleness and solidarity.

One thing, however, we can be certain of among all the uncertainties in life is that summer is around the corner. We don't know of course if it will be a nice and warm summer, or a cold and rainy one, but we can try to make the best of it regardless of how it turns out.

I wish all of you who have now graduated and those who soon will graduate, first year students who have an exciting year of learning ahead, hopefully on campus, and colleagues who have worked hard, a wonderful summer, although it might not be exactly the one that you had originally planned!

References:

<https://theconversation.com/oh-the-uncertainty-how-do-we-cope-32155>

<https://theconversation.com/uncertain-many-questions-but-no-clear-answers-welcome-to-the-mind-of-a-scientist-134388>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/07/science/coronavirus-uncertainty-scientific-trust.html>