Retirement Day Speech

Jayadeva Uyangoda

Vice-Chancellor and Colleagues,

I want to begin by thanking all of you for being present today. You all have also endured bad weather. I feel delighted to see so many friends from all faculties, other universities, and from civil society outside the university as well. I am also glad that Nirmal, Mahesh and Pradeep, and the colleagues in the department of political science, have managed to honour at least one of my injunctions – to make this a low key event, with no song, dance and drums, literally and metaphorically.

Thanks a lot for those very nice, kind and sweet words of friendship and sentiments of goodwill that were expressed by the Vice Chancellor and other colleagues. I feel truly overwhelmed by what all of you said about me.

I am particularly happy that some of my family members are also present. I want to acknowledge the presence of Vyvette, my wife, Deanne, my daughter, and Kanishka, my son-in-law, representing my immediate family, and Gamini and Padma, my extended family. Some of us in the academia have developed a rather strange habit. That is of interpreting and exercising to the extreme the liberal principle of separating the professional and the personal, or public and the private. My family members for decades have been victims of my adherence to this principle in its most absurd form. That is why my retirement day is also the first day for them to be in this campus along with me, in my company. I am grateful to Mahesh and other colleagues for their gracious gesture in inviting my family and honouring them as well, although the four of us reached the 'College House' separately!

I joined the academic staff of the Colombo University in December 1981, not by choice, but by default. For some strangely political reasons, I and Dayan Jayatilleka were not recruited to the University of Peradeniya where we studied political science and graduated with fairly good grades. In my case, it was obviously my political antecedents of being a JVP leader during my early youth and my spending six years in jail as a 'terrorist' that scared the authorities at Peradeniya University at the time. Not being offered a job at Peradeniya, even on a temporary basis, I came down to Colombo to join the Social Scientists' Association as research assistant to Dr. Newton Gunasinghe. When applications were called for positions to teach political science at the Colombo University, I applied. Dayan had by this time gone to the US on a Fulbright scholarship. Towards the end of the interview in Colombo, Professor Stanley Wijesundera, the Vice-Chancellor who chaired the selection panel, asked me a pointed question: "Will you continue to do politics?" I replied: "I will, but not inside the class rooms or with students." I got the job, but later I heard that Professor Wijesundera had a somewhat hard time to convince members of the University Council that appointing an ex-Left-wing insurgent to the academic staff of the university in the capital city – incidentally, located adjacent to the most bourgeois quarters of the capital -- would not be an imprudent decision.

By being in the university system for 35 years, I have also had the privilege of participating and watching the history of Sri Lankan universities being made and unmade. That history has achievements as well as setbacks. This is not the occasion for me to reflect on that checquered history. But, I must say that I am lucky to retire at a time when a historic new space has been opened up for the renewal, reinvention and regeneration of our university system in all its aspects – teaching, learning, research, administration, governance and reform. A few years ago, we all had to endure, and fight against, the worst crisis that our university system has had to suffer in its entire history. The crisis was so grave that even talking about the crisis was viewed as a sign of being deviant and retarded, or

less harmfully, being anti-national, pro-terrorist, and funded by NGOs, jeopardizing even national security! We are lucky that that phase of crisis, decay and darkness has come to an end. I am so proud that the University of Colombo has been at the centre of that resistance and struggle to recover the lost soul of our universities. All, if not some, of you have been participants, or at least observers, of that heroic struggle. Some of you, particularly Professor Dissanayake, would remember that this same hall, the hallowed precincts of University of Colombo's Senate, was a site of that battle.

I am so immensely relieved to retire in the year 2016. This is the time that both the UGC and University of Colombo are in the safest of the hands we could possible think of. Thus, I have no regrets to retire now at a time when the fruits of our struggle for a better university, better salaries and living conditions for the academic staff, greater autonomy, less and less bureaucratization, and freedom from narrow politicization, can still be seen and felt afresh.

Just on a materialistic note, it is also such a pleasure to see most of my younger colleagues come to work driving their own semi-luxury vehicles. When I was of their age and status, I had only an old, ramshackled Toyota K 20, donated by my mother-in-law! I only want to tell my younger colleagues, who will stay here for many more decades to come, that their struggle should not end at the University car park, or at the entrance to the kindergarten classes of the Royal Collage or Vishaka Vidyalaya.

As I said, the university system in Sri Lanka is now in safe hands. Yet, there are so much to do with so little time and resources available. The undergraduate education programmes, particularly in the arts and humanities, are under constant pressure for substantial changes, in terms of goals, content, training and expected outcomes. Our post-graduate education, with phenomenal increase in numbers and non-treasury income generation to the coffers of the universities, is in a serious crisis of quality and standards. A large number of our academics are relatively young people, who need not only post-graduate qualifications for confirmation and promotions, but also opportunities for achieving goals of professional excellence in teaching, research, publications, leadership, social commitment, and re-defining the role of university teachers in society.

The past seven years, since 2008, have been the most productive period in my career at the University of Colombo. Somewhat ironically, these years of sustained academic productivity were marked by five years of what I have come to describe as 'compulsory and involuntary internal exile' within the university system. Between 2009 and 2014, I have had five years of blissful leisure with no administrative responsibilities, no membership in UGC or Senate Committees, and not very many invitations to lectures. I had ample to time to read, write, and watch movies. For full five years. January 2015 has changed all of that!

I am pleased to recall that in 2008, our relatively young department launched an MA/Ph. D programme in political science with international collaboration.

Several MA and three of our Ph. D scholars have already graduated. The fourth Ph. D dissertation is being finalized for submission before the end of the month. Hopefully, the department will be re-launching its MA programme within the next few months. I am proud to say, without being given to hyperbole, that our own Ph. Ds, though still a few, are as good as Ph. D's from many foreign universities, in terms of originality and quality of research, sophistication in methodology, high standards in academic writing, and rigour in training, There are also new recruitments being made to the academic staff of the Department. I am so happy and proud that when I leave, my department is ready for a new take off.

I have also been fortunate to make many friends from all Faculties – Arts, Law, Management, Education, Science, Medicine, -- and Institutes, with even bonds of camaraderie. Like Dhaniya Gopala in that old Buddhist parable, I can now stay at home and happily enjoy my retirement. Dhaniya, the cattleman, says to the Buddha:

"The rice is cooked,
my milking done.
I live with my people
along the banks of the Mahi;
my hut is roofed, my fire lit.

....

My wife is compliant, not careless,
is charming, has lived with me long;
So if you want, rain-god,
go ahead and rain."

I don't feel sad about my retirement from Colombo University. From time to time, I will be hopping back to this place like a frog. I know Professor Dissanayake will not kick me out. But I feel strongly nostalgic about this place. Like all of you, this is where I also spent most of my adult life, more time here than at home, as my family member will testify. There are three places I will miss though, my department, the library, and the Faculty Club. These are places where I really grew up.

Therefore, in my retirement too, I look forward to continuing to work with the university system in Sri Lanka. There are two areas in which I would like to devote the time and energies in my old age, if I am invited to. The first is promoting high quality post-graduate education and training, particularly research and academic writing. The second is helping the UGC and universities to establish a university press. The first is self-explanatory. The second needs some elaboration and justification.

Sri Lanka's culture of research and scientific knowledge production is severely handicapped by the atrocious lack of facilities for quality publications domestically, as books and academic journals. With the increasing demand for quantity in publications to secure promotions, spurious journals, vanity publications and low-quality books and electronic journals now galore. This has led to a condition – I apologize for my intemperate words – that promotes mediocrity as virtue and even abuse of promotion schemes at the expense of quality, standards and true merit. If our universities are to become real centres of learning, beyond achieving slightly higher status in global ranking that depends to some extent on on-line propaganda, we need to promote genuine post-graduate education and a genuine culture of rigorous research and serious publications. The art of academic publication should follow standards of quality and rigour in all aspects of it – content, analysis and argument, language, rhetoric and presentation, coy-editing, peer reviewing and refereeing, page-designing, and even simple technical aspects of printing such as selecting an aesthetically appealing font! I will be very happy to help the UGC, or University of Colombo, to launch a quality academic publication initiative, centred on establishing a university press. Of course, if invited!

I am sorry for taking so much of your time. I assure you that this will not happen again,

I thank all of you for coming here to show your warmth, friendship and solidarity. I offer my profound gratitude to Professor Lakshman Dissanayake, the Vice-Chancellor, and Professor Athula Ranasinghe, Dean, Faculty of Arts, for gracing the occasion and sharing their thoughts with all of us. I am particularly grateful to the colleagues, both academic and non-academic, in the Department of Political Science and Public Policy, History, and the Social Scientists' Association, led by Mahesh, Dr. Nirmal and Dr. Nirmalee, and Dr. Pradeep respectively, for organizing this simple and charming event for me. The greatest treasure that any teacher can possess is the memory of students that is worth cherished. I retire with an abundance of it.

Thank you.

(19th May, 2016)