

THE 2024 PETER CULLEN LEADERSHIP PROGRAM GRADUATION ADDRESS

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Good evening, fellow *Homo sapiens* and welcome to tonight's 200,000-year review of our species.

I would like to start by acknowledging the Ngunnawal and Ngambri People on who's land and waters we meet tonight and honour their Elders past, present and emerging.

I would like to extend that respect to all Indigenous people across Australia and thank those that I have met for sharing their wisdom and continuing to come to the table for genuine and purposeful discourse - as we work together to navigate what wise management of this precious country means in the uncharted waters we now find ourselves in.

And given that this review is at a species as well as an individual level, I also invite each one of you to pause for a moment.....and bring to mind someone who epitomises wisdom to you.

They could be someone you know, someone you have read about, someone current or from deep history or even someone younger than you, that you think is wise.

I invite you to bring this person, your own wisdom mentor, to mind and use them as a reference point as we go through this review.

We start 200,000 years ago when modern humans walked out of Africa and began to disperse into every habitable niche across this incredible planet of ours.

These people were essentially the same as us physiologically and share our nomenclature as described by Linnaeus in 1735. He placed us within the Genus *Homo* along with the only other two hominids recognised at the time, orangutans and chimps, but he also placed us apart, by naming us *Homo sapiens*, the Wise Man.

This was at the beginning of the industrial revolution, the die was seemingly cast for the transition from the Holocene – a lovely benign era under which we flourished for about 10,000 years – to the Anthropocene, the era of our own making which ironically is turning out to not be very human-friendly, suggesting perhaps we are not so much wise as a species but we are very, very clever.

Did Linnaeus get it wrong? Should he have called us *Homo callidus*, the clever man rather than *Homo sapiens*? Or did he name us *Homo sapiens* as a kind of mission statement, a vision for us to strive towards. Or did he really think we were wise.

You will be happy to know that this review is not going to be conducted as a compilation of 200,000 annual reviews...like some sort of millennial medal count..... but rather I am going to focus on some key milestones in our shared evolution.

In order to do this, we first need to define wisdom, and this I discovered is a very complex thing to do. Wisdom does not appear to have a single agreed definition in oral history, grey literature or peer-reviewed literature.

Some modern-day researchers view wisdom as an integration of two forms of knowledge: logos and mythos. Logos having formal structures employing logic. Mythos encompassing more informal modes such as speech, narrative, plot, and dialogue.

Regardless of the academic ruminations, there is, a common sense that wisdom refers to a life well-lived, to living with virtuous purpose, to living in a way that supports the collective good. Knowing what is good for the bee is good for the hive, and vice versa.

What baffles researchers today is why only some people are wise and some are not?

And why those that are wise are not wise all the time?

But it is clear that wisdom is not dependent on intelligence, learning, social status, gender, genes, wealth, or other accidents of birth.

So we all have a pretty good chance at becoming wise regardless of the circumstances we find ourselves in.

200,000 years ago global temperatures were very similar to the late 19th Century but as CO₂ levels fluctuated between around 200 to around 300 ppm the temperatures swung around too, dropping at times to much colder conditions giving us ice ages with a couple of relatively short-lived temperature spikes higher than those experienced in the second half of the 19th Century, which is a standard reference point for climate.

At approximately half time between our initial dispersal out of Africa 200,000 years ago and today, people arrived in Australia.

Not being indigenous myself, I cannot speak personally on Indigenous wisdom, but I cite here some words by **Vicki Grieve, University of Newcastle written in 2002** as follows:

In contemporary times, in the context of ongoing colonisation, we tend to measure other cultures against the lifestyles and values of the modern capitalist consumer societies. An alternative would be to measure the worth of societies and their philosophical bases by considering their longevity. A feature of many early civilisations is that they have sealed their own doom by an exploitation of the natural environment. By contrast, Aboriginal civilisation has been notable for its survival over at least 80,000 years.

Doesn't that speak volumes about wisdom and its interconnectedness with nature? especially to those of us that seek the specific wisdom of how best to manage the Australian environment in these changing times.

If we apply a logarithmic scale to time for the sake of an expedient review, we can jump forward to about 2,000 to 5,000 years ago. Unlike Indigenous Australia which Bruce Pascoe described in *Dark Emu* as free of war, poverty and homelessness, things were quite different in Europe and Asia where there were grand city states, emperors, Caesars and lots of warfare, poverty and displacement of ethnic groups. In some ways these 'old testament' times share a lot in common with our socio-economic struggles today, although today our Caesars are corporations and high net worth individuals.

Our ancient communities and cities were fertile ground for the gaining of wisdom.

First up of the great scholars or sages of this era is **Krishna** who around 5,000 years ago reportedly he said that *The wise see the same soul in all living beings and treat them with equal respect. The soul is neither male nor female; it is beyond such distinctions. It is pure*

consciousness. Practice self-control and renunciation without any desire for the fruits of your actions. This is true wisdom."

And to be honest we could stop there. Practicing self-control, not desiring the fruit of your actions and treating everyone the same. Sounds pretty wise, and depending on who's arguments and research you favour, it could be said that most of the wise things that many wise people have written down since then, have stemmed from Krishna's teachings in some form or the other.

Around 2,500 years ago, **Aristotle** talked about two types of wisdom: theoretical and practical. The former involving the exploration of things we can't change, but about which we seek truth. The latter explores that which we can change through making good choices.

Euripides summed it up when he simply said *Cleverness is not wisdom*.

This distinction between the theoretical and the practical, the clever and the wise is fundamental when it comes to evaluating wisdom.

It is a notion that is wisely encapsulated in the Serenity Prayer – which although it was written in the 1930s builds on thousands of years of Christian wisdom:

O God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

For leaders in this modern world, courage to act is imperative, but we must also be wise and understand what role each of us has and the scope we have to influence change, so we don't go mad or burn out.

Climate change is big, let's each take a bite out of that elephant every day. No one person will fix it, but it is in our nature to work together and to work with nature to rehumanise our planet.

A couple of hundred years before Aristotle and half a century before Christ, **The Buddha** said:

Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise, the wise man, gathering it little by little, fills himself with good.

None of us chooses to be born, and we do not know when we will die, but as we live, we gather wisdom little by little and fill ourselves with good. That is a lovely thought.

What a wonderful thing it is to be human, to wrap up a little bit of cosmic dirt into a package that we each call 'me' and take our turn on the merry go round of life to gain wisdom.

And indeed it was **Socrates**, who said that – *Wisdom begins in wonder*.

Wondering about things is so liberating and rewarding, and it is definitely on the edges of our lived experiences that we gain wisdom, especially when we accept that there is always more to learn.

Socrates also said that *The only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing*.

That is quite comforting in a way, as we are faced with climate change about which we know very little - because the future climate in this era of our own making is outside anything that humans have ever experienced. CO₂ levels and temperature are rapidly increasing to levels last seen 2-3 million years ago.

One of my personal favourite quotes about wisdom from around the time of Christ was **Juvenal** who said *Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another.*

That deserves a moment of reflection - *Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another.*

By learning about nature, we become wiser. Nature carries its own innate wisdom that is inextricably linked to our human character, our human nature. Wise people understand that we are one with nature and seek to gain nature's wisdom.

Juvenal's quote resonates strongly for me in our current times when we are becoming all too aware that nature is keeping score on how wise we are, in much the same way as our bodies keep score of the way we treat them in our lifetimes and how wise we are in our personal lifestyle choices.

The Earth is keeping score of the wisdom of our collective and personal choices.

Although experts argue about when it started, it is clear that we are deeply into the Anthropocene.

Over the last 200 years we have in effect dehumanised our planet – not deliberately for the most part, but by being clever rather than wise – it has been an exciting ride and we have certainly been very clever in building all the amazing things we have built, but the cost has been too high.

The Earth has kept score. Burning all those fossil fuels and chopping down all those forests has increased CO2 levels to about double what they were 200,000 years ago and they are now reaching levels that have not been seen since the mid-Pliocene -approximately 3-4 million years ago – 10s of millions of years after dinosaurs and 3.5 million years before us - a time when global temperatures were 2-3 oC warmer than the late 19th century and sea levels were about 25m higher. Some argue that we have now entered the Pyrosene given that places in Canada are now experiencing bushfires much like the arctic circle did way back then in the Pliocene.

Our nation is set to take climate action towards net zero by 2050. There is a real risk, however, that in our cleverness we will pursue engineering and hard infrastructure solutions to our climate change problems, that will spawn another great acceleration period akin to that of the 1950s construction boom in a futile attempt to support our current lifestyles with green power.

A climate-friendly, business-as-usual future powered by green energy with economic and nature positive outcomes is a fantasy, noting that we have been in ecological deficit in terms of using more natural capital than the Earth can replenish since the 1970s.

Hydrogen is the glimmer of hope but hydrogen is very hungry for water, it is also power hungry, power that will need to come from vast numbers of solar panels and wind turbines – not to mention it is mineral hungry – requiring essential minerals that will need to be mined, mostly with diesel power, and that may simply not be available in the quantities we need even if we are very, very clever about how we seek to extract them.

This raises several questions about the wisdom behind our current, essentially well-intended climate actions:

- Can we really achieve net zero 2050 business as usual with nature and economic positive impacts?
- Does transition to green energy at this scale and this rapidly constitute wise use of our extremely limited remaining resources, especially our ailing water resources?
- If we choose to desalinate seawater in the quantities needed to drive a hydrogen future, what will be the impacts on land and sea, and the land that is about to become sea?
- Is this really the best way to rehumanise our planet? By consuming lots more minerals, water, fossil fuels, land and habitats in the next 30 years chasing a dream that we can all continue our consumptive lifestyles in a nature and economically positive way?

As Peter Cullen wrote in 2006 *“One of the difficulties with getting climate issues addressed is that solutions mean that we all have to change our behaviour. Politicians know this will be difficult and unpopular so seek to defer the issue, focus on longer term solutions or address symptoms rather than causes of the problems”*

The solution to climate change is simple.

Use less of everything. Less fuel, less energy, less water, less minerals, less land, less habitats.

Peter was right – that sounds really difficult, but it also makes intuitive and logical sense.

History tells us that wise people live simply and consciously within modest boundaries.

We need to rehumanise ourselves to rehumanise our planet.

We need to focus on what matters, what it means to be human and how best we can live this one wild life we have been given in which to seek our unique piece of human wisdom.

Ultimately, that is all that any one of us needs to do between the uncontrolled moments of our births and deaths – to live our lives rationally and with purpose of building our own character, our own little piece of the mega, omniscient human character that we each participate in and that has persisted through 200,000 years of *Homo sapiens* so far and will live on in future generations.

There are significant socio-ecological shifts ahead of us due to past and current actions that are no longer in our control. But we know that, we know the ecological trajectory that we are on is negative, we are trying to understand it, to turn it around, and we are stronger for it and as we learn more about nature we will become wiser.

We are prepared for climate change.

We are the right people at the right time in the right place.

And as it says in the **Desiderata** we can trust that *The universe is unfolding as it should.*

The great gift of climate change is that nature will reclaim her place and we will become wise to the fact that we are one.

Remember **Juvenal** *Never does nature say one thing and wisdom another.*

The science and philosophy of wisdom tell us that each one of us has the capacity to be wise,

Science and philosophy also tell us that we are one,

We know that we are one species but we are also one with nature, and the more we seek to understand nature, the wiser we become.

Thank you graduates for stepping up as leaders in these very challenging times for water policy.

Your wisdom is greatly appreciated and its continual expansion as part of this collective human experience is strongly encouraged.

And thank you everyone here tonight for listening to my very rapid assessment of the wisdom trajectory of our magnificent species.

In seeking nature's wisdom together, as part of the Peter Cullen Trust community, we are building human character together too.

We are making waves as well as ripples that will persist beyond our lifetimes just like the waves and ripples that Peter created when he was here throwing gems into that river of shared wisdom that flows through us today and connects us to the people that came before us and those that will come after us.

I encourage everyone to gather wisdom little by little and create your own waves and ripples that will pulse and merge with all the other waves and ripples that each of us are making today, that we made yesterday, 200,000 years ago, tonight, tomorrow and 200,000 years into the future.

Good evening fellow *Homo sapiens* and best wishes on your personal wisdom journeys.

Rest assured, you are not alone, we are one with each other and with nature, and together we are wise.

Thank you.