

You can get there from here: The highs and lows of writing a thesis  
Speech to Doctoral candidates at Massey University, New Zealand

19 November 2009

Dr Heather Kavan

When I was invited to speak to you today, one of the first things that jumped into my head was a cartoon strip I saw in a student magazine in my first year at University. The first scene showed a young, bright-eyed student saying, 'Gee, University is fun.' The second picture showed him looking older and wearier, still saying, 'Gee, University is fun.' The third scene carried the same words, but the picture was of a skeleton.

I suspect that the cartoonist had never done a PhD because otherwise he might have drawn a fourth picture, with the student wearing a graduation hat giving a deconstructionist analysis of the word 'fun' that only people wearing the same funny hat could understand.

But my focus today isn't on the scholarly aspects of a PhD – other speakers at your seminar will talk about these. My emphasis is on the cartoonist's earlier images – the excitement of learning versus the wearying years of sustained study – in short the highs and lows of doing a PhD. I'll also offer some thoughts on the personal quality you most need to get through the lows.

For those of you who don't know me, I have the dubious distinction of being the only person in New Zealand who has been on trial for doing a PhD. You may be wondering how anyone can be on trial for doing a PhD. Well, this was the Family Court, and the plaintiff claimed I was working on my thesis and therefore unable to give my daughter as much as he and his wife could.

I won't go into the details of the case, which dragged on for four years, except to say that ultimately I lost my daughter, my apartment, my subsequent relationship, all my money, and even my cat. It was scorched earth way of doing a PhD – everything along the way was destroyed.

I sold my furniture, rented a room, and opened my boxes of PhD material. And then I had an epiphany. I realised that my research was one of the few things in life that no-one could take from me. The quest for knowledge is up there with love, loyalty, and the other immortal experiences. It's almost surprising that Bono hasn't written a song about it.

Each of you too has your own story, your own challenges and sacrifices, which will colour and shape the highs and lows I'm going to describe.

As many of you are in the earlier stages, one of the biggest lows you're probably experiencing is that lingering feeling that you haven't done enough. Each article you read links to more literature, and the realisation of how much you don't know can throw you into a state of near panic. Life events may divert your energies, and deadlines loom. It seems that whenever you relax and do something like watch TV or read a magazine, guilt has a way of squeezing in at the edges.

Another common experience is frustration. Top of the list of PhD frustrations is a breakdown of technical equipment when you're racing to meet a deadline. Coming a close second is when you realise that someone else has already had your original thought.

You can also become so overloaded with information that it becomes hard to work out what's significant and what's not. Does anyone remember when John Cleese came to Palmerston North and was surprised that the audience laughed in all the wrong places during his performance? I couldn't help wondering if this was because of the large number of academics there. Their minds were probably so full of scholarly information that they were making idiosyncratic connections with Cleese's humour and missing the punch lines.

Further down the track you could also experience conflicts with supervisors (who never seem to look anywhere near as impressed by your work as they should) or get entrapped in departmental politics. Also, others you depend on may have their own agendas. The computer consultant who has all your data on his computer starts selling Amway, or the lecturer who has been helping you needs someone to mark 200 first year assignments.

Then there's the dullness. As you yawn your way through a glut of articles that seem to squeeze the life out of your topic, a crashing wave of boredom descends.

To distract you from the boredom there are the classic PhD fears. What if you lose your data, miss your deadline, sleep in on the day of your Oral? But the real question is: 'What if I'm not good enough?' The PhD becomes a sort of Everest, with the added challenge that you've got to dissect and analyse every step the previous climbers have made.

After all this, you may wonder if your research is worthwhile. Here you are: part of the next generation of scholars, with problems to address like global warming, poverty, Aids, and oil dependency; and your 100-page discussion on the fine points of the theory of the non-existence of reality looks rather

frivolous. Sure, examiners like this type of thing, but you may have an uneasy feeling that you're wasting your life.

Well, here's the good news. A doctorate is like childbirth – when you see what you've produced, you forget all the birth pangs. And if you shriek during labour, people will forgive you.

They'll forgive you because most PhD students are experiencing the same thing. The acronym alone is said to stand for 'Permanent Head Damage'. The comedian Melvin Durai says that a PhD 'can put more stress on a human brain than almost any endeavour, except perhaps filing taxes and negotiating peace in the Middle East.'

In fact, the stress has spawned a whole industry. There's a PhD board game, a bit like snakes and ladders, which begins, 'Lose sanity first', and ends with you standing in the dole queue. There are T shirts with slogans, 'Don't ask me how the PhD is going,' 'Ten things never to say to a PhD student,' 'I survived my PhD,' even a T shirt for husbands to wear, 'I survived my wife's PhD,' in fact even one for your dog to wear. Then there's a PhD comic with the trademark line, 'If you enjoy your PhD, you're probably mad already,' and books with tempting titles like, 'How to write your dissertation in 15 minutes a day,' (by the way, the author admits this is impossible and she just wrote the title to grab your attention).

But it's not all suffering and exploitation. There can be tremendous highs. Some are startling; others are things we often don't appreciate until later.

Let's begin with the ones that are easy to take for granted. First, although the situation is changing, most doctoral students get to choose their topic and

follow their passion. No matter how eccentric your interest, you can do a thesis on the subject.

And let's face it, some of us do some pretty odd topics. Last night I did a quick Internet search for PhD titles and here's a sample of what I found: 'Human sexuality and extended spaceflight,' 'The perverse in the Buffy verse' (referring to Buffy the vampire slayer), and 'The suburban culture of the donut store.' However, this next one I really think is cheating: a PhD on 'The PhD as a learning process.'

As well as following your passion, you're working completely for your own benefit; you're not slogging away in a soulless job for someone else's glory.

At some points, there may be excitement. You're exploring new pathways, devising your method, waiting curiously for results, and working in an intellectually stimulating environment. You develop friendships with fellow students, which often continue long after you've got your degree.

Another high point may be the first time you present your research at a conference. I've heard academics say that the postgraduate papers are always the best presentations. You're likely to get constructive feedback, and this may lead you in new, interesting directions. At the same time, you make contacts that can open up career opportunities further down the track.

Then there's the rare sense of satisfaction you get when you're deeply engaged in your work. There's something almost archetypal about the image of the lone scholar studying in a dimly lit room, living on the financial edge, and oblivious to the outside world. I like to think that there's a kinship with scholars from history who, despite great financial and personal sacrifice, have

toiled through the night, obsessed with the same questions that obsess us. Sure, this isn't a line of reasoning that I'd like to try out if there were debt collectors at my door, but it's an uplifting thought.

Sometimes too, feelings of satisfaction catch you unaware. You may return to a chapter you wrote some time ago and be surprised by how good it is. Or you may be so pleased with a section you've written that you re-read it and admire it again and again.

But the best highs are the moments of discovery. Suddenly, inspiration strikes, and an idea flashes into your mind. Your heart pounds. Time stands still. You've discovered something, maybe even something no-one in the history of the world has noticed or understood.

It doesn't matter how small the discovery. Nor does it matter that when you tell people they look at you strangely. Scholars spend their life aching for experiences like these.

The key to making these discoveries seems to be tenacity: persisting when most people would give up. Songwriter Benny Andersson likens the process before a breakthrough to sitting outside a cave waiting for a dragon to emerge. If you wait long enough, the dragon will come out. Others will walk away from the cave, tired, bored or hungry, but if you just hold on, the dragon will appear.

Another great milestone is the day all PhD students dream of: you finish your thesis. Elated, and most likely sleep deprived, you take your manuscript to the printers and choose the colour for the binding. Later you collect the

bound volume and hold it in your hands, feel the solid board, smell the fresh print, and admire the gold lettering on the cover.

Finally, of course, there's that soaring moment when you're awarded your degree. The late nights have paid off, the time of insanity is over, and the journey that began with one small step is now ending with the examiners congratulating you.

You've got Doctor in front of your name, new skills, and a killer vocabulary. You've also got an edge in the research and academic job market – less than 1% of the population have PhDs. There are even more payoffs down the track when you publish a book or articles about your research, or get asked to give expert opinion on your topic.

Some of these experiences may seem far away from where you are now, so let's move on to answering the 'how' question: How do you ascend from the lows to the highs?

Between the extremes are experiences in the middle: experiences like hope, optimism and humour. When you're on a low and the high seems too far away, the best thing you can do is move to this next level up. It's like changing gears on a car. It's easier to shift from first to second and then third gear than to change directly from first to third.

You can logically move to a position of optimism because the facts are on your side. More people finish their doctorates than those who drop out, and it's rare for a candidate who has completed a thesis to fail. The task itself is no different from any other piece of research except that it's sustained, and if you didn't have the ability, you wouldn't have been allowed to enrol in the

first place. Moreover, the outcome is totally within your control: those who get doctorates aren't necessarily the most brilliant candidates or the ones with the best opportunities; they're simply the ones who stayed with it to the end. Ultimately, a PhD comes down to tenacity.

You'll recall that I mentioned tenacity earlier when I was talking about the role persistence plays in making discoveries. But there's another side to tenacity too, and that's believing in yourself. Some call this tenacity of spirit.

There's an inspiring example of this in physicist Leon Lederman's recollection of an encounter he and a fellow physics student had with Albert Einstein.

The two graduate students travelled to Princeton in the hope of meeting the great genius. Einstein agreed to see them, and, after the customary greeting, asked each of them what they were studying. Lederman answered that he was doing experimental research on the properties of pions and his friend answered that he was working on quantum theory. Einstein shook his head, replied that these were a waste of time, and said goodbye – crushing them in about thirty seconds.

Most of us would be disappointed, if not mortified by the experience, but Lederman and his friend were on cloud nine – they had talked physics with Einstein! Both continued, with exceptional enthusiasm, on their 'time wasting' topics, making significant discoveries, and in 1988 Lederman received the Nobel Prize in Physics.

That, for me, is tenacity of spirit, and Einstein himself, described by his biographer as 'the freest man I have ever known,' would have appreciated their intellectual independence.

It's almost time to close now, and I'd like to do so by sharing with you an image from history. Five thousand years ago, the Egyptians carved statues of a mysterious figure called the sphinx. The sphinx was a half-lion, half-human being who reclined in front of entrances to special places where initiation rituals were held, and asked the seeker a question. He wouldn't let you through the doorway unless you gave the right answer.

Like the sphinx, the PhD experience throws up questions, demanding you give the right answer before you go through the door. And whether these questions are personal, academic, or even just financial, the answer is always the same: 'How much do I believe in what I'm doing?'

And that pretty much sums up my message. On the surface a PhD is about your literature review, methodology and analysis, but at a deeper level it's an initiation ritual that tests your belief in yourself. Five, ten, maybe twenty years from now, you'll have forgotten how much blood you lost, and you'll pick up your thesis, read a couple of pages, and wonder how you ever thought it might not be good enough.

And for one crazy moment, you may even think of doing a second one.