

## A FUNNY THING HAPPENED ON THE WAY TO THE PODIUM

Some weeks ago the Warden of Convocation at my University was kind enough to ask me to say 'a few words' in response to the Toast of the Graduates of 1963.

I was chuffed, not only because part of the gathering comprised middle-aged doctors whom I had taught as students and in their formative professional years, but also because 1963 was a milestone in the history of a University now celebrating its Centenary of existence. I thought carefully as to how to milk the situation to its utmost.

In a flash, at 3.00 am, when natural urgencies and brilliant ideas always seem to coincide, securing a sleepless hour or two, I had the notion to download Barbara Streisand memorably mouthing that wonderfully poignant number – "The Way We Were". I knew that if I could bring it off as a well-prepared surprise there would not be a dry eye in the house.

The young woman in charge of IT at the venue told me that there was "**No Problem**" – which should have been a warning in itself since this commonly-used, almost exclusively Australian phrase really means, "Buddy, this is no problem for me and I couldn't care less if it turns out to be a problem for you." Cautiously aware that there is many a slip twixt the cup and the lip I stressed to her that if the number did not come in at the moment of my summoning I would be left high and dry like a missionary with dysphasia. She reassured me that this could not possibly happen, that she and her colleague were well versed in instantaneous entertainment. Exploring that statement no further, I left her with notes of the exact five sentences I wished to say before setting her in motion by the raising of a quizzical brow and an almost invisible flipping of the wrist.

We parted in an atmosphere reminiscent of the clinical scenario wherein the doctor reassures but has absolutely no idea of the likely outcome.

On the day, I entered the vast ballroom early and took my place at the densely goblet-graced table close to the platform and its lectern. This lifelong tendency to be there before the audience stems partly from the dictum of Flanders and Swan that one should ascertain "the pitch of the hall," but also to enhance one's comfort within its ambience. Lecturing from a tumbrel in a crowded courtyard was never within my dream world.

Shortly, as I was seated with my glass of Chardonnay – reflecting the conservatism of the University – I was approached by another young woman whom I took to be the instantaneously entertaining 'colleague'. She bent and crouched on her knees confidentially at my side. "It's *perfect*," she said, "and I haven't told a soul!" I sensed that we were accomplices in a soon-to-be consummated perfect coup. In fact, I realised how Eisenhower must have felt just before the Normandy landing.

The introductory speeches over, and in particular an excellent all-embracing, philosophical and nostalgic presentation of the Toast to the University and the occasion, I was called to the podium where I paid the necessary obeisance to the occasion, the preceding speakers and the toast master, briefly explaining that, as an elderly academic, I was incapable of a 'few words' since, like my peers as they age, I was afflicted with the condition of Professorhoea making brevity impossible and prolixity the norm. I then urged the audience to sit back, take the glass of wine in their hand and even close their eyes should they so wish or should emotional pressures overcome them.

With a gentle turn to the right, an upheld hand and a beckoning flip of the wrist I summoned the 'colleague' from her arcane alcove to her duties. In response, she appeared at the door with a look of shamed bewilderment on her face and a hopeless elevation of her arms followed by a defeated shrug. Barbara Streisand had fled, if she had ever been present.

Meanwhile the obedient audience, glasses clutched, leaned back expectantly, about one half with their eyes closed already awaiting the magic moment. As I gathered my senses I posed the bald-faced, illusions-banishing question "Where were you when Kennedy was assassinated?" bringing us all into a barefaced state of reality and bewildered frustration. Regaining a shaky composure I canvassed various other parochial academic landmarks before I turned to the attitude of the historian Niall Ferguson who, in *Virtual History*, urges us all to ask the question "What if?" before we embark on a study of the actual. Having disposed of this in terms of their current careers, their marriages, their successes and failures I turned, as I had planned, to Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken".

As Speaker and Audience we stood poised on the brink of the yellow wood with its two roads diverging – suddenly, who should join the party? You guessed. Barbara Streisand. The beautiful voice, the evocative words were quite lost and the two minutes and thirty nine seconds were something of a travail with the audience looking about in an embarrassed fashion being perhaps brutally recalled to some memory of a failed examination, a romance that went nowhere or a marriage that might never have happened had an egghead or bluestocking not captured their innocence. Meanwhile, the Colleague stood triumphantly in her doorway awaiting the accolades.

Being utterly deflated and depressed I set about challenging the Chardonnay. When the afternoon was mercifully over I staggered to the bus, since by good fortune I now have no car, and in the warm, comforting, massively reassuring ambience of the charabanc promptly fell asleep to be awakened at the terminus in Fremantle by a friendly driver who said "This is the end of the road, Dad. Would you like to get off or," – facetiously – "would you like to turn round and go back?"

He seemed quite surprised when I meekly said that I would like to go back – but not to the UWA Club.

– Alex Cohen