

## SPC St Patrick's Day Luncheon Address

Firstly, it's an honour to be up here today sharing with you some of the experiences I've had lately and some things that I've learnt. My days as a student here at St Pats finished in 2017, and now 6 and a half years have passed, but it feels like yesterday I was sitting in one of the classrooms wearing the uniform and having the time of my life. I somewhat hope it still feels this way at my 60-year reunion.

Upon reflecting, I've realised a couple of things:

- The number of years post-SPC is now greater than the number of years that I spent here as a student, which I feel should not be true, but it is. How time flies!
- What else is true is something that gets told to you almost everyday as a student and that is you will develop life-long friendships from your time as a Paddy Boy. I am grateful to still be close with guys that I went to school with and still get to share in their achievements and watch their lives progress.
- Lastly, I've come to realise that it is very difficult to explain to someone who did not attend St Pats the feeling of what it means to be an Old Boy. A lot is said about the memories that you make, the friendships, the lessons, the comradery, the fun, and the collective joy and enthusiasm for anything St Pats. But for some reason, putting it into words to explain to someone else never quite captures the true feeling.

I look back very fondly of my time here and I am very grateful for the lessons that I learned as a Paddy Boy, as they have provided a solid foundation to rely upon when aiming for new heights. I have my aspirations and my goals, and I am very driven to succeeding them. And this is what I wish to share with you today – a little bit of what I've been up to post-St Pats and where I'm aiming for the future. I also wish to share some of my experiences from last year traveling to Africa and what I learnt from these experiences.

After finishing up as the HaPE trainee here at St Pats in my gap year, I began a Bachelor of Psychological Science at Deakin University in 2019. 2020 came around, and so did COVID, and with that, as we all know, everything changed. In terms of university study, it all went from face-to-face learning to solely online. During this time, I found that I was putting far more effort into (and subsequently enjoying) my elective subjects. These subjects were mainly within the school of Anthropology, and it dawned on me that I had discovered a new passion of mine. It was an area of study that I was quite unfamiliar with, but an area of study that I could see

fantastic potential in – people say that ‘possibilities are endless’ and with anthropology, the possibilities really are endless.

No topic was off limits. From Witchcraft and magic in African Zandeland, spirits of the Amazonian Jungle, and trance dancing rituals in West Africa, to Melanesian gift exchange, caste segmentation in India, demon exorcism in Sri Lanka, and nomadic pastoralists of the Tibetan plateau. Throw in land disputes in Israel and Palestine, senses of place and belonging in urban Los Angeles, robots, cyborgs and the digital metaverse, and you’ve got yourself a melting pot of contexts, situations, cultures, and topics to explore. My attention and imagination was captured in a way that I have not encountered elsewhere.

I was exposed to these various topics, intellectually, at a time where life felt compressed, mundane, and severely limited – I refer to the pandemic once again – and I guess it is no surprise that I felt a sense of liberation and escape, through the exploration of, for example, trance dancing rituals in West Africa. Studying anthropology opened my mind up to the near unlimited number of potential ways of being human and showed me that the old adage of ‘there is more than one way to skin a cat’ is profoundly true: there is more than one way of being human.

Not only this, but it also forced me to look at my situation differently. The conditions that the pandemic presented no longer felt restrictive or compressed or deflative. Rather, it became this super weird and strange experience where taken-for-granted ‘normative’ things were just different. And that is the key: anthropology, in my understanding, takes away the possibility, or practicality, for judgments like ‘good’ or ‘bad’, ‘positive’ or ‘negative’. Rather, it forces you to see difference. What is familiar to you becomes strange, and that which is strange becomes familiar.

So, I ended up transferring from my Psychology degree to a Bachelor of Arts with an Anthropology major. I completed this with First Class Honours, writing a short thesis about cryptocurrencies and what they mean for the contemporary human experience of the Global North. That took me until the end of 2022. At this point it felt similar to finishing year 12. Completing an undergraduate degree presents another crossroads – like a chapter in a book is ending and you must start a new one. Only this time, unlike when I finished year 12, I had a

clearer vision of the direction that I wanted my life to go – of what the next chapter looks like. Among various things, one of the most immediate desires was to travel.

So given my interest in Anthropology, my goal and vision for the future – that being a PhD in anthropology, and my desire for strange, extra-ordinary experiences, one of the places I chose to travel to last year was to Tanzania as part of a cultural immersion program as a volunteer. The program was a 2-week stay within a Maasai community, near a junction called Makuyuni, about 45 minutes from the nearest major city, Arusha. The whole experience was nothing short of life changing.

When I arrived, I was greeted by members of the community with a welcome dance. They were dressed up in their traditional clothing: wearing what they call a ‘Shuka’ – a colourful cloth that is typically red in colour, worn most commonly as a kind of shawl. The women wore an abundance of beads and jewellery, mainly around their necks or their wrists, that jingled as they danced. Most of the men carried the typical items of a Maasai warrior: a spear and shield, with one of them instead holding a ceremonial talking stick, that signified that person’s prestige in the community. To welcome us, they began chanting in their language. Then came time for the jumping. A circle formed, and the Maasai warriors took turns at entering the middle and jumping as high as they could and slamming their feet on the ground to the rhythm of the chanting. These men are mostly quite tall and slender, but don’t let that fool you – some of them could jump as high as my shoulder.

The whole experience of the welcome dance could be off-putting for some. I remember another volunteer saying that when she experienced it, she wanted to turn and get back into the landrover and drive away. She later said that she was glad she didn’t, as for her too, the whole volunteer experience was life changing.

The Maasai, traditionally, are semi-nomadic pastoralists, meaning they move with their cows typically on a seasonal basis. Culture is fundamental: boys are left with the cows and girls take care of children and the Boma (which is the household). In the past, cows were obtained through raiding other tribes and clans. Nowadays, they are bought and sold at the local market (although, some raiding still goes on). As keepers of cows (and more commonly goats and sheep), to the Maasai, these animals are everything. The animals are kept for food and for milk, but uniquely for their blood. The Maasai drink the blood of the cows as one of their main

sources of nutrients. They do not kill the cow, rather they make a small incision at the cow's neck and the blood pours out like water from a tap. I guess it's a bit like investing in shares: if you sold your shares, you would end up with a pot of money (if your shares have done well, of course!). But if you hold your shares, you might be paid in dividends. Only this way, the set of shares is the cow, and the dividend payments is the blood from the incision at the cows neck.

This economic analogy is a pretty close way to how the Maasai actually view their cows. Because the cows are really their currency. They are used in trade and exchange between clans and families and the most important use of payment is for bridewealth: a payment of cows from the kin of the groom to the kin of the bride. If a future groom does not have enough cows to pay the bride price, then he will ask his neighbours or kin for cattle. Often, wealthy Maasai men hold cattle in trust for those that are less wealthy. Wealth in the eyes of the Maasai is signified by the number of cows one has. It is the quantity of cows that matters, not the quality. This is because from the perspective of the tribe, social status is most important, and status is intimately connected with wealth.

Another marker of wealth or status – or more accurately culture – is the Maasai stick. Every Maasai male who is of age will carry a stick at all times. They will never *not* have the stick in their hands – it becomes an extension of themselves. Practically, the stick helps them control the herd of goats, sheep, and cows. But its real point of interest lies in its social meaning. Symbolically, the stick is of great importance. It demands respect. If you have a stick, you are a man, and it shows others that you are worthy of being Maasai.

Connected is the idea of the Maasai poverty line, which I understand to be at about 3-4 cows: if you own less than 3-4 cows (so if you are below the poverty line), you must give up the stick and throw it away. Being below the poverty line means you are no worth to Maasai society and so you must give up the stick as a symbol for giving up your Maasai identity. So the stick is extremely important to the social world of the Maasai. You could say that one cannot even conceive of the Maasai identity without thinking about the Maasai stick.

During my 2 week stay at Makuyuni, I became good friends with a Maasai man named Philemon. He would often call me 'kaka' which means 'brother' in their language. Philemon is a teacher at the local school, which is where I spent most of my volunteer time helping out. He speaks very good English and is exceptionally wise beyond his years. However, exactly

how old he is, I cannot say and that is because he does not know his birth-date. The Maasai way of life makes them unconcerned with dates of birth, and at the time of his birth, there were no clinic cards for reference. Instead, his mother describes his birth as being at a time during heavy rainfall when the tribe was moving with the animals to look for green pastures and water. Happening also at the time was conflict between the Purko and Loita sub-tribes. I still grapple with this idea that one can grow up and not know their date of birth, but just knowing that one day at some point they were born, and for that to be enough to satisfy them.

Young men are ritually circumcised around the age of 16 or 17, where it happens in front of the whole community. The young man cannot flinch, or else he brings shame to his family and the community. He cannot be a good warrior if he shows pain. The ritual circumcision represents the transition into adulthood, meaning the young man can now be married, own cattle, and start a household.

This is not the only rite of passage involving the young man. Another is called the Emanyata. Socially and politically, the Maasai structure themselves within interlocking age sets, set about 10-15 years apart. The Emanyata acts as the graduation ceremony for the youngest age set to move into becoming Warriors. It is also when the current warriors move into being considered elders, although it is not officially celebrated as the festival – that is to say, the event focuses only on the new warrior set, even though other transitions are taking place. To my understanding, the elders and the warriors form a distinct relationship at the categorical level. You could think of it like this: the elders are the politicians, and the warriors are the police. Although that is a crude simplification and in fact their dynamic is a lot more complex than this. But the general identification is still valid: the elders maintain a more intellectual role, whilst the warriors play a more physical one.

I asked Philemon about his Emanyata, and he described it as a magical and fantastic event, with all the Maasai of the warriors age set coming together with their father's age set, being taught bush knowledge and how to be a Maasai warrior. Not-surprisingly, cows are involved, and are very much a sacred aspect of the event. He also described how he and his friends fought and killed a lion with nothing but their spears – which traditionally acts as the big crescendo to the Emenyata festival.

Philemon taught me many other things in my short time with him. He taught me that to celebrate when a baby boy is born, the Maasai will sacrifice a brown-headed sheep, but when a baby girl is born, they will sacrifice a pure white sheep instead. He taught me how to throw a spear like a Maasai warrior. He taught me that they view each star as representing a generation of people – we are currently in Abraham’s generation – and that if the stars are twinkling then it’s a sign that things are good: healthy goats, healthy family, strong friendships, fertile land, etc. He also taught me that wealth really lies in the number of friendships you have.

I could go on and on with more stories and bits of information that I learned, but I'm aware that you've been listening to me for a bit now. Hopefully from these insights into the Maasai people of Tanzania you can gain an appreciation for their culture and also for the anthropological approach to understanding it. I am a big believer in the understanding of difference and in the value of non-Western knowledge, not just for our sake as Western people, but for the sake of humanity at large. In every other human being, there is the possibility for ourselves. The exotic and radically different culture of the Maasai, parts of which I have shared with you today, can only be fully comprehended by taking into account and accepting that they too are human – that is, recognising that their way of life, their culture, their very Being, exists within *our own selves* as a possibility by virtue of our shared humanness. Such recognition stimulates a greater understanding of our shared human condition, and my time with the Maasai certainly left me feeling closer to this broader experience of being human.

So what do I do now, after having this ultimate experience?

Currently, I teach an anthropology class at Deakin University in Geelong, where we explore conditions of violence and the workings of the state.

I have just contributed a chapter to an edited book that has just been published, which focuses on cryptocurrencies and their relation to theories about crowds and communities. I'm also in the process of getting my honours thesis published in an academic journal.

On a volunteer basis, I do some work for a Humanitarian Intelligence organisation, using intelligence research to enable effective decision making around the delivery of humanitarian aid and disaster relief.

In the near future, I hope to undertake a post-graduate degree in Anthropology somewhere in the UK. I am waiting to hear back from several universities after sending my applications off last month. I am also trying to secure funding to make this dream a reality.

Ultimately, I have my sights set on a PhD and a career in academia, hopefully researching more about the Maasai people and their nomadic lifestyle.

I hope what I've offered you today has been interesting, enjoyable, and insightful. I thank you all for your time and for the opportunity to speak to you. I wish you all the best and I hope you have a brilliant afternoon.