

Christ Church Grammar School
Principal's Dinner
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Nic Brunsdon bio

Nic is the director of the architectural practice POST-, the director of the urban program Spacemarket, which pairs underutilised spaces with useful people, and the director of POSIT, a research office and think-tank.

He is registered Architect in Victoria and WA having first begun as a sole practitioner in 2006 winning the best small residential award for his practice's first completed project.

In 2007, he accepted a position in Abu Dhabi, UAE as the head of a newly formed design division for a Gulf building company, managing the construction of various large commercial and residential projects. In 2010, he returned to Perth and resumed practice while beginning to teach at UWA and Curtin University, running masters studios up until 2013. In 2014, Post- was formed. Past projects include: the Moana Chambers, Elizabeth Quay and MANY 6160.

In 2014 he was appointed to the Chapter Council of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects and currently sits on the Awards Committee, Gender Equity & Equality Committee and has recently chaired the Heritage and Residential Award Juries.

In 2014 he was the winner of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects Emerging Architect Award, firstly for WA and then as the sole winner nationally in 2015. He is a past nominee for the 40 under 40 young business leaders award, a nominated 'thought leader' for the City of Perth, and in 2015 was the recipient of the 2015 Dulux International Study Tour for Emerging Architects.

What would my 17 year old self want to hear? My 17 year old self wouldn't have wanted to hear anything. I was an up-myself know-it-all ratbag. For the sake of ease, let's just assume you're all like that too.

So, this isn't going to be about trying to impart wisdom. The wisest thing you can know, is to know that you don't know.

This is all happening tonight, not because I'm special, but because you've been told you all need to be here, year twelve feels like an important time in your lives, and I've done an extra 20 laps round the sun. So, perspective might be a better way to frame this speech. Let's try for that...

To me, this is all about Time. And what I've seen of it.
10 minutes out of your life you wont get back. Thank you for it.

(SPACE TIME)

Let's go big. Let's get deep. Come with me...

I want to talk about the Cosmic Calendar.

If the entire history of the universe was condensed to one earth year, with the big bang happening on New Years Day Jan 1st; from then, we basically have 7 months of dusty black nothingness. The sun and planets form sometime around August, single-celled life turns up in September, the first trees come months later on December 23rd, dinosaurs arrive on Christmas Day and are wiped out shortly after on New Years Eve. Us, Neanderthal humans, all of us, turn up in the last 10 minutes of the year. And all of recorded human history, human civilization, everything we hold dear, know to be true, is special to us, our knowledge, our stories, our ancestors, all occur in the last 21 seconds. ...Perspective.

There's an amazing photo which a hero of mine, Carl Sagan, writes about, called 'the pale blue dot'. It's a photo of earth, taken by the voyager satellite as it spun off out of our galaxy. The NASA engineers decided to turn the satellite around and get one last photo looking backwards towards our solar system before it was out of radio contact and lost forever. In that photo, Earth shows up as the tiniest of tiny specks, a slightly white pixel, in an arm of the milky way, in a rainbow band of light in the all encompassing void and darkness of space. ...Perspective.

Here's what Carl said about it:

"Look again at that dot. That's here. That's home. That's us. On it, everyone you love, everyone you know, everyone you ever heard of, every human being who ever was, lived out their lives. The aggregate of our joy and suffering, thousands of confident religions, ideologies, and economic doctrines, every hunter and forager, every hero and coward, every creator and destroyer of civilization, every king and peasant, every young couple in love, every mother and father, hopeful child, inventor and explorer, every teacher of morals, every corrupt politician, every "superstar," every "supreme leader," every saint and sinner in the history of our species lived there--on a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."

...Perspective. Deeper now...

If you put yourself back on that timeline, the cosmic calendar, "you", have two distinct states. There's 'You' and then there's 'Not You'. 'Not you', i.e., all your bits and pieces, you as star dust, earth and minerals, exists for 364 days, 23 hours, 59 minutes, 59 seconds who cares how many milliseconds. 'You', this specific collection of chemicals, "you" exist for just this last, briefest of moment. In the length of spacetime, it's logical to then say that your default state, that is, what you spend the most of your time being, is 'Not You'. And as a comparison, it's not even close. Australian male average 82 years of "you" versus 13.8 billion years "not you".

(LIFE TIME)

What this all tells me is that life, this life, is so damn precious. So important and such a random fluke of luck, that you, me, we all happen to be in this room, at this school, in this year, together at this moment. It is all so fleeting. This moment right now, won't happen again.

To me this says, don't take anything too seriously. Everything is temporary. We're all just passing through.

Thinking like this means that life is, at its core, a game. We get one quick shot at it. And that doesn't mean that it isn't important and that you can't make a meaningful contribution. Instead it says that it's up to you to determine how you want to live it. Which metric do you want to succeed at?

Be clear about it. Is it happiness, empathy, money, family, power, knowledge, strength, compassion? Or is it something more particular? A specific career, a specific role, a specific experience? It's completely up to you.

But how do you know what to choose? I got lucky. When I was here there was a kind of feeling that I'd end up at UWA doing commerce. Expectation from parents, peers and postcode. It was never that explicit either, as it may not be with all of you. My sub-conscious however saved me. I still don't remember writing 'Architecture' on my uni course choice form, but there it was. Mum thought that I was lazy and didn't bother get past the 'A's' in the course handbook.

What was stranger was that after I'd I picked it, my cousins and childhood friends all said, 'oh yeah, Architecture, of course'. I'd apparently loved drawing, my cubbyhouses had recessed skylights and secret lofts and my lego houses were always crisp, white and modern. I had a predilection and natural aptitude that time, and the seriousness of secondary education had forgotten.

So, find yourself in your most natural childlike state. Before the world started shaping you and when you didn't care what your friends or parents thought. Know who you are away from your circumstance, away from your family and your peers.

These are incredibly important people but, most significantly, they are not you. You are from these people and of these people, but you are not these people. The sooner you find and indulge your own happy eccentricities, the better. The world rewards differentiation. Scarcity is valuable. Have the confidence to not fit in.

I was at a talk given by Steve Biddulph last month where he spoke about the concept of finding your 'True North'. That is, the thing that you and you alone love, are interested in, or are good at. He thinks we all need to have gap years, or at least the ability to get away from all scrambling interferences. To step off the treadmill that has been running your life for these last 13 years. We need to be able to give ourselves the time and space to be able to sit, think and let our compass spin, and then settle naturally.

Find great teachers. These people are most often, not your parents, so go searching. They're everywhere. Great teachers light a fire rather than filling your head bucket. A great teacher will show you the world. A great teacher will change your life.

I was saved by my sub-conscious. I've had friends who are only now, 20 years later, changing their careers to something more suited. They ran with the crowd, feeling there was safety in numbers, in the obvious or easy decisions, and they're paying for it now, big time. There's a saying that "The easy road gets harder, and the hard road gets easier". Don't squib the hard decisions. Hard decisions will pay you back exponentially in the years to come.

(SLOW TIME)

Which leads to my next bit. Slowness and Quickness.

Your life right now is all about choice. Who are your Friends? How, what and when to study? How and who to have relationships with? How to engage in a sport, music, academic, artistic, musical, political or social community? Nothing is ever a given and nothing is ever set in stone. Take your time when choosing any one thing. But when you do commit to a choice, commit big.

Slow, slow, quick.

Think. Does it feel right? Intuitively? With your heart? Forget what your head says, it's a ridiculous bloody nuisance that is normally the voice and words of your parents. Assess it all together against your core self. Then choose and choose fully. And don't forget to be courageous.

If you're going to, go to uni, but be the best damn student. If you're going to be in a relationship, do that, but only if you can be the best partner ever. If you're going travelling, immerse and lose yourself fully. If you're not feeling any of those options, don't do them. Take your time. Work yourself out first. Self-knowledge is the only true knowledge. It'll save you a thousand times over. Slow, slow, quick.

The big trap is to do 'slow slow quick' backwards. And it seems to be the way the majority of the world operates. Quick, quick, slow. Quickly committing to a career, and then being slow to leave it. Staying in a bad relationship when you're not feeling it. Creating a big emotional mess and being slow to remedy it.

Slowness is powerful in all parts of life. It's never about the big moments. It's the quiet grind. Awards and accolades are nice, but it's not the reason you should ever do anything. It's not the wedding, it's the marriage.

Learning. Life. Love. Work. Relationships. Do it properly. Remember the cosmic timeline. What's the point in drifting? Half-heartedness is death. Your life will be your greatest creation. Live it well.

I haven't spoken much about me because, if anything, I want you to remember the message of this, rather than the particulars of my life. I'm not special. I'm just a guy standing here saying some words who will soon be gone. You, however, will continue. So, here are some final words that have been good to me. Successes and failures, gains and losses. I hope they'll mean something to you too.

IF, by Rudyard Kipling.

If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:

If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing left in you
Except the Will, which says to them: 'Hold on!'

If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!

Thank you.