The lady next to me was puzzled. She couldn’t understand why I was “taking the trouble to visit Guyana to speak for only fifteen minutes.” I explained that it was the most important speech of my life. She smiled and shook her head unconvinced. It came to pass that I was standing before hundreds of graduates amidst pom and ceremony and this is what happened:

If only Ma can see me now! Thank you, Mr. Chairman. We welcome your Excellencies, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Ministers of the Government, Members of the Opposition, the Pro-Chancellor, the Chancellor of the University of Guyana, our esteemed Vice-Chancellor, and the Faculty and students of the University. A special welcome also to the overseas students of UG. In my time we didn’t have you, so welcome to our beautiful country.

Today is a special day for our graduates who have worked very hard and are proudly sitting here with their families. You are here with your parents, aunts and uncles and your Nana and Nanee and I know how you feel. I was in this same building in 1976, forty-one years ago.

I felt a happy and proud graduate of UG. So congratulations. Let’s hear it for our graduates please, and their teachers, and the people that did the cleaning and picked up the garbage. Like a jig shaking the loom, we are all involved.

I am proud to be standing here because we are part of each other. I am you and you are me and together we make up this green land of Guyana. We are the ocean in a drop, to quote Rumi.

I was speaking to former Chief Justice Desiree Bernard, a distinguished Guyanese, and I asked her what she thought I should speak about. She said, “Just tell them about yourself. Give them a dose of integrity with honesty and keep it simple.” So I will leave that long speech on development economics and social policy for another time.

The lesson here is that we were poor but we had love for each other. We cared for each other. We looked out for each other. Adela and Mother Hackett were Afro-Guyanese but who graduates, have to blaze the trail and practice mutual tolerance and respect. We are all in this together; we are all involved.

Do not look at each other and see race. We are one people, one nation with one destiny. Race will get us nowhere. As graduates, you have the responsibility to work for a tolerant society, to ensure that we eliminate racism and look out for each other. We can have oil wells pumping in our living rooms but if we can’t get rid of this racial bogeyman we would be standing still. It starts with mutual respect and tolerance.

I failed every test I took and they blamed the school. This was a school at Dekindere headed by the illustrious Julius Benjamin Nathoo, one of Guyana’s greatest educators. I was a little fish in a big ocean. I couldn’t adjust. I loved to listen to Mr. Nathoo. I never saw anyone so brilliant. He was a colossus. Please permit me to acknowledge Mr. Nathoo and all the teachers, from kindergarten to university. You are doing a wonderful job molding the minds of our children. We love you teachers.

It came time to write the GCE O’ levels. We counted the pennies and Ma begged to make up the difference. I took the exam and failed. I took it again and failed. Ma said that I shouldn’t give up hope. When you are down you have to get up, you must pray. I didn’t see it that way. All of my friends were moving up; I was behind.

Here is another lesson: I was in the dumps but not once did I think of harming myself. We read with dismay and much grief that our country has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. We must stop this insidious practice.

Graduates, have to blaze the trail and practice mutual tolerance and respect. We are all in this together; we are all involved.

Do not look at each other and see race. We are one people, one nation with one destination. Race will get us nowhere. As graduates, you have the responsibility to work for a tolerant society, to ensure that we eliminate racism and look out for each other. We can have oil wells pumping in our living rooms but if we can’t get rid of this racial bogeyman we would be standing still. It starts with mutual respect and tolerance.

I failed every test I took and they blamed the school. So I went to Philadelphia Scots School and met many wonderful teachers but failed Common Entrance. I was a little fish in a big ocean. I couldn’t adjust. I loved to listen to Mr. Nathoo. I never saw anyone so brilliant. He was a colossus. Please permit me to acknowledge Mr. Nathoo and all the teachers, from kindergarten to university. You are doing a wonderful job molding the minds of our children. We love you teachers.

It came time to write the GCE O’ levels. We counted the pennies and Ma begged to make up the difference. I took the exam and failed. I took it again and failed. Ma said that I shouldn’t give up hope. When you are down you have to get up, you must pray. I didn’t see it that way. All of my friends were moving up; I was behind.

Here is another lesson: I was in the dumps but not once did I think of harming myself. We read with dismay and much grief that our country has one of the highest suicide rates in the world. We must stop this insidious practice.