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 groningen
 2014 | 400 years

for infinity

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*Award Ceremony Honorary Doctorates Celebrating
 400 years of University of Groningen
 Martini Church Groningen, Friday 13 June 2014*

Acceptance speech Professor Ronald Evans

for infinity



It is a great pleasure to be here, and what a splendid occasion in a most spectacular setting. Where history is made. 400 years of inspiration, of commitment and realization in pursuit of the most important force in propelling mankind forward... knowledge.

On behalf of the award recipients, I wish to thank Professor Elmer Sterken, Rector Magnificus, as well as other Rectors, along with distinguished faculty. And for the Graduating Class of 2014: Give yourself a hand. You have climbed the mountain and reached the summit. Job well done.

Today, 10 Honorary degrees are being awarded; I am privileged to be included among the select group of academicians, scientists and leaders who are recipients. Congratulations.

Here is a puzzle posed 50 years ago by the great theoretical physicist and molecular biologist Max Delbruck... "I am the riddle of life. Know me and you will know yourself. Who am I?" Its answer will come later.

In one way or another, we all grapple with the meaning of life or how can we add meaning to life. Whether it is medicine, law, theology, mathematics, commerce.... It is life's mysteries that fascinate, challenge and define us... and for those on the podium...keep us up late at night.

People often ask me: is it really worth it to work for endless hours, day and night, sacrificing time with loved ones, and running on minimal sleep? My answer is YES. In law, mathematics, business, philosophy – you can change the world with ideas. In my research, the reward can be to lay eyes on something never before seen by anyone, to learn a new fact about life or the disease of a loved one, or to discover a new drug. For that one beautiful moment, yes, it is all worth it. And as often as not, that moment is really a portal into a whole new world that defines a career and provides meaning to the odyssey that is science.

I didn't get this at first.



In 1985, my lab was on the verge of a breakthrough – though we didn't know it. We were a bit like the archaeologist Howard Carter, whose decade-long journey led him to the foot of what would be a miraculous and magical moment – the discovery of King Tut's tomb. Likewise, the long march of our scientific caravan left us at the foot of our own impenetrable, uncharted and undeniably captivating pyramid. A pyramid that held the keys to unraveling the elusive secrets by which genes regulate body physiology: it's what wakes you up, what puts you to sleep, what controls sugar, fat and reproduction.

Unbridled, physiology can be a powerfully destructive force, but controlled, it is everything we call life. "This was it. This is what we were looking for. This is why we were here" I told everyone. Secretly, I was thinking, "yes, we had found it. But what the hell is it?"

Thus with a mix of excitement, puzzlement and fear I knew the journey and the real challenge was yet to begin. Once the discovery was announced, we could see dust clouds of scientific teams zooming toward us. It was essential we get in and get in first. But how? To do that, we would have to ask the right question. Well, in the summer of 1985, we discovered a concealed entrance, decrypted the scientific lock and walked into a dream. We were first to see and describe a chamber filled with jeweled discoveries. It was true magic... and more was yet to come.

Like all journeys with unknown destinations, I realized these discoveries could enable us to understand diseases I never intended to study. This had a profoundly personal resonance for me since I had lost my own brother only 10 years earlier to Acute Myeloid Leukemia (AML) and I would in a short time find a new treatment for that disease. As scientists, we often don't meet with the people whose diseases we study, or the patients our research ultimately benefits. For all of us, discovery begins as innate curiosity of the world, but it often finds a way to make itself personal and we are constantly reminded of the underlying humanity of the work we do. When big questions yield to big answers, we must then ask ourselves how we can use this to help the world and in some way benefit mankind.





In science, law, philosophy, business, the arts...talent and a good mind is not enough. You have to learn to push yourself into vast uncharted and often treacherous waters. When there are no charts it takes passion and focus not to lose your way. It's an open mind and a bit of courage that alters history. (Speaking of passion, I met my wife Ellen – in the lab – I guess passion comes in many guises.)

In the bigger dimension, science interfaces with society and that interface changes the world. The Human Genome has been sequenced. How its genes are controlled is in sight. The genetic basis of diabetes, cancer and aging is being cracked. The stem cell revolution is launched and genomic medicine is on the horizon. We are living in one of the greatest ages of science, that will yield unprecedented opportunities to cure some of the most serious diseases known to humanity.

I began with a quote, “I am the riddle of life. Know me and you will know yourself. What am I?” The answer is DNA. Our genetics. It makes us who we are.

I end by saying why the university of Groningen, on this 400th Anniversary, is special. It is its history, culture, discoveries – incubated in this remarkable city. In a commencement address from the award-winning author Anna Quindlen, she said that “people don't talk about the soul very much anymore. It's so much easier to write a resume than to craft a spirit.” Science law, philosophy...are intensely human enterprises driven as much by the heart as by the head. When I look at my resume I see colleagues and friends from around the world and a cauldron of ideas and rich emotion.

My thanks to you for letting me share in this special day. Congratulations for all you have achieved.

While the University was founded in 1614, in 1687 Sir Isaac Newton published his theories of gravitation in the “Principles or the Principia” – So all of you may be comforted by the knowledge that what stood up will now sit down.