

Diploma ceremony

I could begin this speech by saying: "You did it! And you're fucked."

That's what Robert De Niro said in his speech to the graduates at Tisch School of the Arts in New York about a month ago.

He was referring to the fact that there is no job waiting for the graduates as they leave Tisch, and many of you find yourselves in the same situation. Statistically, about one third of you will be unemployed after one to two years. This has been the case for previous years. But this is a nut that I would like us to crack together.

Robert de Niro spoke about rejections in his speech. It is his experience that people have to cope with a lot of these, but that they are hardly ever personal. I agree with this. As an architect and a designer, you have to be able to withstand rejections. Pick yourself up when you fall, and then walk on, undaunted.

If you were graduating with a degree in medicine, economics or law, maybe it would be easier to find work. But that is not the path you have chosen. You opted for a practice-oriented, artistic and research-based path. There are not a lot of those paths in Denmark and the rest of the world. Our education is something special. But here you are, keen to enter the labour market, and it may seem like a huge and steep climb. There are no open invitations. How do you even begin to tackle such a task?

You probably need to start by realising that you can now go in one of two directions: You can aim to become a small fish in a big pond – or you can aim to become a big fish in a small pond. Or in plain English: become either a turd in a palace or a king in a sewer.

The American journalist Malcolm Gladwell, who is famous for questioning well-known dogma, wrote a book about this recently. It's called David and Goliath. In this book, he turns the question about disadvantages upside down, asking how much we should listen to adopted conventions.

As the title indicates, the book starts with the story of David and Goliath. Let's just remind ourselves what that is about.

We're back around the 11th century BC. The Philistines are fighting against the Israelites. At one stage, they stand on each their mountain slope, facing each other, a valley between them. Nobody wants to attack, because the one who does has a clear disadvantage. Then the Philistines send a giant warrior down into the valley and ask the Israelites to do the same. They agree that whoever wins can take the others as slaves.

The giant soldier is formidably dressed in a helmet, a full-body bronze armour, which weighs more than 100 kilos, and in his hands, he carries three large weapons. Oddly enough, none of the Israelites volunteers. But then a small shepherd boy steps forward. He is used to defending the sheep against lions and bears, and he is up for the challenge. On his way down into the valley, he picks up a couple of stones, and when he is close to the giant, he puts one stone in his sling and hits the giant right in the forehead, and the giant falls to the ground.

The giant made the mistake of presuming that they had agreed on the rules for the fight, and had they stuck to his rules, the outcome would undoubtedly have been in his favour. But that's not what happened. David followed his instincts and did what he was good at.

Malcolm Gladwell uses another example about the advantage of disadvantages. This is more like your situation. We move 29 centuries forward to 18th century Paris, which at the time is the centre of the world of arts. We're talking about the painters Edouard Manet, Edgar Degas, Paul Cézanne and Pierre-August Renoir. They were pioneers within modern

art, so-called impressionists. Later, as we all know, they would be considered the best in the world, but back in the 1860s, it was an uphill struggle for them. If you wanted to move forward as an artist in those days, you had to have your work exhibited at the so-called Salon. Nobody bought art that had not been exhibited there. It was almost impossible to get in. Some artists shot themselves after a rejection. The Salon expected depictions of a soldier saying goodbye, of a young woman shedding tears over a letter, and stories like that – Biblical and mythological subjects. They didn't want everyday depictions of urban man in nature, painted by artists who didn't mix colours on the palette, but built up their motifs in brushstrokes.

The impressionists were rejected over and over again, and the art critics mocked them. At some stage, Manet, Degas, Cézanne and Renoir made a decisive choice: Instead of being little fish in a pond they had not chosen themselves (and where it was an uphill struggle to move forward), they chose to have a go at being big fish in a small pond that they HAD chosen themselves. They made their own exhibition. The rest is history, as they say. – And they became huge!

The impressionists did what I presume most of you do. For ages, they aspired to achieve what their nearest peers considered most desirable; to be accepted at the Salon. However, their story shows that it is not always prestigious institutions that serve our interests best. If you can't join them, beat them! Make your disadvantage your advantage. Whoever follows the so-called 'direct route', that is, quickly gets their design patented or is employed by a world-famous architectural firm, chooses a long and tough path, which is crowded by many others who want to reach the top by following the same path. Is that where you want to go?

With Malcolm Gladwell's stories, I hope that I have given you the courage to consider a career path that is not the direct one, not the one that will immediately win wide recognition among your colleagues.

I don't believe that you're fucked. I know that you are incredibly talented. You are here because you chose a different route from so many others. A less straight path for your career. Now, you need to have the guts to continue to do things in a new way. I hope you realise that a goalmouth scramble is a bad idea. Choose a different path from everybody else when it comes to finding a job: Get a job in a municipality in Western Jutland and experience what it is like to be alone and in demand for your competences. Get acquainted with the municipal caseload and use this knowledge strategically later on in different contexts. Get a job in a production company that has never had an artistic academic on the inside, and show them how your design skills, your empathy for the users and the ability that you possess to handle complex issues can be used at the highest strategic level in the company. Go abroad and gain experience there that Danish employers have not got yet.

Initially, it doesn't have to be about design. That will come later for those who want to work with that. I can see from the exhibition that we are about to open over here in a minute, that you fully master that part. We have wall-to-wall competences over there. Instead you should do what you did when you decided to apply for enrolment on our programmes: Be bold. No: Be very bold!

It is really a cock-and-bull story that you will get furthest by taking the direct route!

It may actually be better to start off as a king in a sewer rather than as a turd in a palace.

Good luck on your journey!