

Acceptance speech Eranda Jayawickreme, 26 March 2026

The theme selected for this year's Dies Natalis, Connect, Create Change, could not be more resonant, or more urgent.

We seem to be living in a moment of profound fracture. Across the globe, and particularly in the United States where I live and work, the political and cultural fabric that holds communities together is badly strained. Institutions built over generations to protect democratic norms, safeguard academic freedom, and advance peace are being challenged at a pace that would have seemed unthinkable just a few years ago. Against this backdrop, the question of how human beings, and especially young people, find the resources to grow, to connect, and to flourish in the face of challenges and adversity one of the defining moral and scientific challenges of our time.

My research has focused on how people navigate adversity, and in particular, the possibility that people may experience benefits from their experience. Post-traumatic growth, at its best, is evidence of our capacity to be changed by suffering in ways that deepen our character, broaden our relationships, and clarify what we most value. But that potential is not guaranteed, equally distributed, or even in many cases likely to be fulfilled. The conditions that make growth possible, such as safety, connection, trustworthy relationships, and communities that bear witness to suffering, and are precisely the conditions that structural inequalities and political polarization undermine.

Utrecht University, through its Strategic Theme "Dynamics of Youth," has built a wonderful community for exactly this kind of work. The university understands that caring for young people is a rigorous scientific and moral project, one that requires crossing disciplinary boundaries, sustaining long-term partnerships, and refusing to treat the most vulnerable among us as edge cases. In a world where so much in academia pulls toward fragmentation and short-termism, that commitment is genuinely distinctive, and it is what makes receiving this honor particularly meaningful to me.

I am very much aware that this recognition comes at a moment when the infrastructure of knowledge in the United States, including our universities and funding streams, is under threat. Defunding research and casting doubt on the value of rigorous social science will not make our societies less polarized or our young people more resilient. On the contrary, what protects young people, what enables communities to stay connected under pressure-- these are scientific questions, and we need the freedom and the resources to pursue them honestly. I hope that by continuing to do that work, and by strengthening the

international partnerships that make it stronger and more credible, we can demonstrate what universities at their best are capable of.

I would like to thank Rector Magnificus Wilco Hazeleger for his generous welcome and for presiding over this occasion. I am deeply grateful to Professors Jaap Denissen and Odilia Laceulle, my honorary promoters, whose example as researchers and collegiality towards me have made this connection with Utrecht feel genuine. I thank my colleagues at Wake Forest University and the many collaborators around the world who have shaped my thinking in ways I am still discovering. And I thank my family, and particularly my wife Lisa (who is in the audience today), who have supported my career with patience, humor, and love.

To receive an honorary doctorate from Utrecht University, in this church, on a day dedicated to caring and connecting is a great honor. I accept it with humility and as a mark of a renewed commitment to the work, the questions, and the communities that make that work matter.