

Convocation Address: "Time of Hope"



CONVOCAATION ADDRESS

On receiving the Degree of Doctor of Letters, Honoris Causa

*Presented at
Brock University
St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada*

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*By
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Chair
Board of Governors
Commonwealth of Learning*

Mr. Chancellor, Mr. Chair of the Board of Trustees, Mr. President, fellow-graduates, distinguished guests and friends, I am deeply moved by the honour that you have conferred on me today. I count it a privilege to become a member of Brock University which reflects the vitality and hopes of a new generation of Canadians as our country enters the 21st Century.

Convocation is a time for celebration. I congratulate the graduating students. I rejoice with you, your families, professors and friends and wish you well in your future.

But first let me say that I am proud to take my place among those who are graduating today; and to be part of a university that has become, in the short space of forty years, one of our country's most dynamic institutions and has achieved a stature that is the envy of many older ones. Its founders were visionaries. Its presidents have provided bold and imaginative leadership. Its professors have set high standards in their teaching and research. Its students and graduates are a source of pride.

The degree you receive today recognises that you are better equipped to add new dimensions to your lives and to our country which is respected and trusted throughout the world. It is not a passport to success. I hope that you won't take it too seriously. I recall going to a conference of university presidents in New

York. On learning my destination the taxi driver remarked, "Well mister, if you don't have a college education, you gotta use your brains".

As I was gathering my thoughts in an effort to say something original, I was reminded of the Scottish lawyer whose stone front door-step had worn down. Fearing that he might become liable for damages if one of his clients slipped on it and fell, he enquired about the cost of a new step. He was told that it would be one hundred pounds. This alarmed him even more! It then occurred to him that, if he turned the step around, there would be a sharp edge on the other side. When the stonemason told him that this would cost ten pounds, he quickly had it done; only to find that his grandfather had done the same fifty years earlier.

Like the Scottish lawyer, I may not be original but I shall try to offer a fresh perspective.

Some of you will recall that, in *A Tale of Two Cities*, Charles Dickens described the uncertainty and contradictions of the era that preceded the French Revolution as "the best of times and the worst of times, the age of wisdom and the age of foolishness, the season of light and the season of darkness, the Spring of hope and the Winter of despair".

Those words of Dickens have a familiar ring in our time. We, too, live in a world of contradictions. Never before has there been so much wealth, yet so much poverty; never before has there been so much education, yet so much ignorance; never before has there been so much power, yet such a feeling of powerlessness as the world faces unprecedented threats to its security and well-being.

Our world is dominated by two formidable challenges. First, most of you know that over one billion of the world's peoples are trapped in poverty - eking out an existence on less than one dollar a day; and that Canadians belong to 20% of the world population who own and control more than 80% of its wealth and consume 70% of its resources. Most of you may not know, however, that US \$200 billion flows annually from the developing to the rich countries for interest and debt service payments on loans they have received from the World Bank and other sources, the re-cycling of profit and the flight of capital. In short, the poor are subsidising the rich.

The economic plight of the developing countries today blinds us to the contributions that many of them have made to human progress. Long before the advent of the Greek and Roman empires, and before the rise of Western Europe, mature and advanced civilisations flourished in Asia and Africa. In the 13th Century the universities of Toledo and Cordoba in Spain were full of scholars from the rich countries of the East - now known as Syria, Egypt, Iran and Afghanistan. For four centuries Arab medicine was the source of scientific and technological progress. Nearly 200 years before Gutenberg revolutionised printing in Europe, the Koreans developed the world's first moveable type. And Africa possessed well-developed forms of centralised states and of political organisation which were destroyed by Europe's colonial powers.

The events of September 2001, and those that have followed, have prompted an almost single-minded reaction on the part of many governments and people in the North - one of overwhelming attention to physical security. Many are persuaded that it is less important to respond intelligently to two phenomena

that now imperil the global landscape, each of which bears upon the security threat. The first, as I have mentioned, is the desperate misery in which hundreds of millions live. The second is the vulnerability of people everywhere to the perils arising out of an over-burdened and inter-connected planet. It is manifested by fear and economic losses as hostile pathogens spread across our world. They include SARS, avian flu, and the most devastating disease in all history, HIV-AIDS.

We are a single global community. As in all communities we are responsible for each other.

Despite its human, scientific and technological advances our world is in peril. Extremes of poverty and wealth or of wellness and disease are the seeds of envy, of hostility and, all too often, of criminal behaviour. They result in instability and insecurity for all. Worse still is the push to divide the world by religion. Blaming a particular religion for our fears is fraught with danger and could have unimaginable consequences.

Further, we cannot impose our will on those who disagree with us or assume that our form of government is superior to all others or react to violence with violence. Why? Because it does not work.

Mahatma Gandhi demonstrated the power of non-violence in liberating India from foreign rule. Nelson Mandela has shown that forgiveness and love were the most effective instruments in overcoming the anger and hatred engendered by the despicable apartheid system. The British avoided conflict by transforming an empire into a Commonwealth of free Nations through peaceful means.

Today's challenges are complex and formidable. While it would be foolish to ignore current dangers we must seek the common ground between adversaries, build bridges of understanding and trust between nations and share the bounty of this planet that Providence has entrusted to our care. It calls for a new idealism inspired by knowledge and humility.

Your strength is your idealism. Never allow anyone to rob you of it - because without it your lives will be empty and without meaning. Your idealism can enable your generation to turn peril into promise, danger into opportunity and despair into hope. Courage, compassion and commitment should be your lodestars as you construct an ethic of decency and of sharing that is without parallel in our country's history. You can be the leaders in giving a humane imperative to the efforts to create a secure world. If your education has not prepared you for this responsibility it has failed.

It is a daunting challenge but times of danger are times of opportunity. They are also times of hope when new possibilities arise and new horizons appear. You can be the architects of a more humane and just world. All through the ages men and women, like those of you who are graduating today, have faced and overcome no less awesome tasks. You may not succeed in all that you attempt to do but do not let future generations say of you that you lacked the vision or the courage to have made the effort. In your hands lie our best hopes for the future. It is still a beautiful world.