

Address by Dr. David Braybrooke on the occasion of being awarded the degree Doctor of Laws (*honoris causa*) at Convocation, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Dalhousie University, May 24, 2011, Halifax.

Every recipient of an honorary degree has some reason to think that he or she is not worthy, if the reason is just that there are so many whose deserts are at least equally compelling who will not be getting one.

As a professional academic I have been opposed to honorary degrees. I have supported, I still support, the rule at Cornell University, from which two of my non-honorary degrees derive. Cornell does not award honorary degrees, and thus abstains from a practice that maybe too often departs from academic achievement

However, it is typical, even definitional, of a rule that it comes with exceptions, even if it is in the main an important rule. Thus "Thou shalt not kill" is an important rule, but it has impressive exceptions, which differ from country to country. Canada like the United States makes an exception for killing the enemy in battle; unlike Canada, the United States, or at least some of the United States, makes an exception for capital punishment.

The Cornell rule sometimes conflicts with arresting exceptions. In the 18thC The University of Oxford awarded Haydn an honorary degree of Doctor of Music. Who could have deserved it more? Furthermore, a charming man in every respect, Haydn was very moved and pleased. He appreciated the honour, and he deserved it as recognition for his distinctive and commanding contribution to human happiness, among other things creating the musical form of the string quartet and contributing to the creation of the musical form of the symphony.

The recognition, it may be held, falls with music within the regular bounds of academic attention. But those bounds are not all that should count in honorary degrees. To insist on attention to academic achievement takes a narrowly professorial view of what universities are for. Professors think they define a university, but they must concede that students have a place, even students who are not entirely studious. The university offers them an opportunity to become more alert, more perceptive, and better-rounded than mere Philistines. They have a place in the university's history. But so do a lot of other people who contribute to that history by endowing professorships, endowing scholarships, building classroom buildings, laying out athletic fields. So it is not just academically significant exceptions that may lead us away from a narrowly professorial view of a rule for awarding honorary degrees.

To return, however, to the academic, professorial view of honorary degrees. I do not bring deserts comparable to Haydn's to the award of an honorary degree. Yet it is not entirely self-regarding for me to make an exception for myself from my support of the Cornell rule. The degree is not, I think, given me to encourage me to be a memorably substantial donor. Prospects of donations aside, my personal history of long commitment and service to Dalhousie here works in my favor toward a personal exception, along with my personal history of fathering a family that has studied at Dalhousie, besides growing up in its shadow. Moreover, the occasion of the award is also an occasion for a family reunion, bringing together people from Vancouver and Austin, Texas, and from Baltimore and Sackville, New Brunswick, as well.

The reunion is a transitory moment, like the sort of event that is celebrated in haiku. So, I shall hold, is the ceremony of awarding me an honorary degree.

After I dropped out of regular teaching at Dalhousie, I married a Japanese and affiliated to a degree with the culture of Japan. Thus haiku became an important part of my life. Someone at Dalhousie with a tender prospective concern for the patience of the present audience warned me that my speech should not last more than 10 minutes. Inspired by this warning, I began thinking about the speech by thinking that it could aspire to something like the brevity of a haiku. Something like because a haiku is not long enough: It would take less than half a minute to speak. Some people in the audience, I am bound to concede, would no doubt appreciate this, but others, maybe most, would think that I had failed to offer a response serious enough for the occasion. A haiku, moreover, would not only be too brief, and say too little in that sense. It would say too little in another sense. It would do no more than offer listeners a verbal picture in which a single thought, perhaps a very simple single thought, was active. Consider, for example, a haiku by Basho:

the old pond –
a frog jumps in,
water's sound

Though with some effort and ingenuity it could be argued otherwise the thought here is both single and simple.

It would be harder to argue that it was in any way specially relevant to an academic ceremony.

Something would be more relevant that could be taken to allude to the stage by stage progress that all of today's graduates have made from year to year until they came now in procession to receive their degrees. Basho has also left us

As I clap my hands
with the echoes, it begins to dawn –
the summer moon

This haiku evokes the multiplicity of the applause, one might think a multiplicity that corresponds at this time to the multiplicity of the audience. Every person applauds singly, but many people may be applauding at once. The haiku, and the moment that it expresses, looks back to whatever is being applauded and it echoes the applause. It also looks forward, at the moon hanging with future implications as dawn infuses the summer sky. In the West, we do not often think of the moon at dawn, as would come naturally to a Japanese who has got up early to be on the scene, for example, at the moon-viewing pond on the edge of Kyoto.

Yet this haiku, rich as it is in these allusions, leaves something out, namely, the momentary nature of the ceremony. It also leaves out the organic connection of the moment with the history of the persons present, in particular those of you about to graduate.

The momentary nature of the ceremony has two aspects. On the one hand, the moment crystallizes the cumulative achievement of past efforts. On the other hand, it anticipates the future achievements that those efforts have put the graduates – you graduates, with earned degrees – in a position to realize. Another haiku would bring these matters forward. This is not Basho, but Braybrooke:

now Alma Mater
helpfully arrays her limbs,
brings futures forth

That's not Basho but it's a haiku, with a more relevant subject than the frog jumping into the pond. It has a metaphorical biological dimension, reflecting both the process of conception and the process of birth. Moreover, whatever its intrinsic merits, it is unique and so far unrivalled, I expect, in Dalhousie ceremonies. It may be rivalled in the future. I may be setting a precedent following which later honorary degree recipients will produce further haiku.

The present haiku does have the merit of presenting the two fundamental aspects of a degree-granting ceremony, at once looking to the past – that's how Alma Mater, shall we call her "Alma," by conception got into this position – and looking to the future, which is where the present activity will lead to. Birth is a concrete metaphor with the two aspects.

One aspect reflects the past – in this case the variety of what with a little poetic licence I may call procreative activities, reading, thinking, speaking, writing, which culminate in the second aspect – the future activities that the degree program prepares students for: further academic work in some cases, but in others careers in law, medicine, public policy, business, households. Thus, even when the past activities have not been strictly academic, they can spread into the world at large and gather assets on the basis of which the university may be received with favour on all sides – the candidates' side; the side occupied tensely, eagerly, by the university; the side of the general public.

The ceremony, therefore, both in the narrow academic sense and in a sense that takes a broader view of academic purposes and academic results, is a win-win activity. The participants win by their past efforts, as does the university; the university wins by the future favour of the participants, and they win, too, by having a concrete affiliation, with an historic institution beneficial to their country and to the world. The ceremony, insofar as it succeeds, enlivens this connection.

My haiku may bring all these things into play, but it may be thought too abstract, too far away from biology and nature.

It could be revised to bring it closer: I originally had Alma Mater "spreading her legs", rather than "arraying her limbs", and that locution might bring in more vividly the biology of conception and the biology of birth as well. Yet I am afraid, from uses of the phrase

“spread her legs” that I have lately come across it might be unseemly and detract from the dignity of the present solemn academic ceremony. Moreover, imagine something like what you would find in the rental shop of the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, a fan of panels or partitions, beginning close to nature and moving in what they depict to increasingly artificial styles. In this ceremony we are a great number of partitions or panels removed from nature and in truth we should recognize that fact. Nature by itself does not produce poetry or rhetoric. Centuries of civilizing effort have led from the scene of the frog jumping into the pond to our ceremony, with its multiple participants recalling multiple actions performed according to multiple rules. We do not just lead our fledglings to the edge of the nest and push them into flight. A ceremony like this one belongs to a number that test our graduates and authorize them to fly in directions to some extent prescribed.

Yet we have not escaped nature entirely, nor should we want to. We speak to the occasion and that inevitably manifests in part our biological presence. There are people here – human organisms – who whisper and sing together from time to time. It might have been otherwise. The whole program might have run on a word-processor with no whispering or singing at all. The joyous brass music that year in and year out sounds at such a convocation as this might have escaped hearing. Let us be glad that the ceremony continues to have a visible and audible footing in life – in our lives memorably brought together, as we pause between past and future.