

Convocation Address – 21/5/2013

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Cross-appointed to College of Sustainability

Chancellor Fountain, President Traves, colleagues, families, friends, and graduates –

It is a privilege for me to be asked to make a few remarks to you, the graduates of 2013, on this day of accomplishment. As you all know, the university plays many roles in its community – local, regional, national, and international. The first and best reason for the university to be here, however, is *you*.

Speaking selfishly, one of the things that happens when you become a ‘senior’ academic (meaning you get older!) is that you are asked to take on various administrative roles around the university. In other walks of life, this is called being ‘kicked upstairs’. Most of us are not terribly well equipped for these roles and can find them quite challenging and stressful. I, for one, have had many a trying day full of administrivia ‘rescued’ by the instant gratification of a great class. For this, I and my family owe you, our students, a debt of gratitude!

When I was a junior professor just getting started in this business, I received two pieces of wisdom that have continued to resonate throughout my career. The first came from a much loved Professor and mentor, Ken Heard, who came to Dalhousie from the University of Natal in South Africa in the mid-1960s and whose personal opposition to the apartheid regime in that country left him with a deep and quietly inspiring commitment to the idea of human rights. He told me that every year, he would think that the place would never be quite the same without the several graduating students he had been particularly inspired by – and every year, several more would emerge to fill that gap and provide fresh inspiration. This exactly mirrors my own experience.

The second is from a Dalhousie graduate, Suzanne Morton, who has gone on to have a highly acclaimed career as a Professor of Atlantic Canadian history at McGill University. Suzanne told me many years ago that, while she fully expected most of her scholarly publications to sink more or less without a trace, she was convinced that if she helped in some small way to shape a handful of students who went on to do good things in the world, she would have made an important and enduring contribution.

I am sure Sue was entirely too modest about the impact of her scholarship, but her sentiment about the importance of our teaching and mentoring roles with students has continued to resonate. I am constantly, truly amazed by the diverse accomplishments and contributions of our

graduates. In my own case, I think, for example, of a student who became one of the founders and leaders of the Small Arms Survey, dedicated to reducing the trade and impact of small arms in marginalized communities around the world; another who has worked to give voice to the girls and young women who were abducted and forced to become ‘bush wives’ with the infamous Lord’s Resistance Army in Northern Uganda; and others who have built on their training in international studies and development to become advocates and trainers for restorative practice in Halifax schools, or provincial bureaucrats promoting sustainable practices in local and provincial government policies. Of course, not all of you can or should be expected to become national or international leaders; but *all* of you are equipped to become engaged citizens in societies that need your engagement – locally, provincially, nationally, and globally.

Every generation faces its own share of unprecedented challenges – but it is fair to say your generation faces *more* than its share. We live in a time when pragmatic adjustments to ‘the way things have been’ – often hard enough – will not suffice to meet the demands we face. First and foremost, the need for more far-reaching change is driven by unprecedented environmental challenges, which require a transformation in the way we think about our traditional paths to wealth and opportunity. But it is also driven by the challenges of widening social inequalities, within and between countries; by dizzying technological changes that have created extraordinary new stresses on young people and security establishments

alike; by challenges to our government institutions, which often seem ill-equipped to cope with the speed, scale, and novelty of their onrushing responsibilities; and by a crisis of participation in which the proliferating ways and means of engaging in public debate are paradoxically mixed with an apparent decline in the *interest* of many people in joining those debates, particularly in long-established democracies like our own. I could go on, but you get my drift.

Of course, extraordinary challenges often produce exceptional creativity, and there are signs all around us that we could be at the start of a new era of innovation and transformation. But the transformations we require will not happen without determined leadership from diverse groups and individuals, along with support and indeed *persistent pressure* from knowledgeable and engaged citizens.

The paradox is that history teaches us that grand designs for far-reaching social transformation – no matter how widely desired - *always* produce unintended consequences, and *often* destructive ones. The great ‘isms’ of the last century, including fascism, communism, and unfettered capitalism, all bear witness to what Simon Dresner calls this challenge of reflexivity. In my own field, the politics of development, the last 50 years have been marked – some would say scarred – by well intentioned ambitions for social and economic transformations that have too often led to unexpected and disappointing results.

This, then, points to the ultimate challenge to your generation. On the one hand, there is no evading the need to face up to, and attempt to shape, a range of far-reaching changes in, for example, the way we relate to our natural environment, the way we support each other, and the way we participate in and govern our multiple, changing communities. This requires both creativity, and a new politics of *boldness* and *ambition*. On the other hand, knowing the dangers and risks involved, it requires *humility* and *adaptability* – to recognize, evaluate, and respond to the inevitable, unanticipated consequences of the changes we pursue. We often don't think of this bundle of characteristics together, but they will all be necessary as we face up to the challenges and opportunities of the 21st century.

There are two pieces of good news in what I fear I may have portrayed as a rather daunting landscape. The first is that it is precisely this bundle of qualities and abilities that a liberal education in the social sciences and humanities seeks to equip you for. The ability to recognize and analyze historical trends, to identify and debate alternatives, to evaluate evidence, and to be mindful of the varied social impacts of the changes we are faced with, are all a part of what you have been taught.

The second piece of good news is that positive social change is within our grasp. Last week for example, I had the opportunity to participate in a meeting in Norway with academics and policy makers from 10 different countries, marking 15 years since Canada and Norway signed a joint declaration committing their governments to the shared pursuit of “human security” and the creation of a new “Human Security network.” The idea of human security – that the diverse threats to individual human beings should be given priority over the security interests of national governments – represented a quite radical departure from the traditional assumptions and practices of international diplomacy. Yet in the couple of decades since this idea was first popularized in international politics, it has led to a range of remarkable accomplishments. These include an international convention banning anti-personnel landmines, a convention banning cluster munitions, the creation of an International Criminal Court to hold accountable those responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity, and the promotion of a new “Responsibility to Protect” people at risk of atrocity crimes, falling on both governments and international organizations. As with all far-reaching innovations in international practice, those associated with the “Human Security Agenda” have faced their share of setbacks and unanticipated consequences. Not surprisingly, they remain politically controversial. Yet taking the rough with the smooth, it is hard not to read them as important steps forward in the pursuit of a more humane and just international society.

What my meeting last week brought home was that these accomplishments were very largely the work of a relatively small network of committed practitioners from relatively small countries, closely collaborating with diverse coalitions of voluntary organizations linking concerned citizens from all over the world. These citizens came from an extraordinary array of backgrounds, including many who had been directly affected by human *insecurity*, along with those in relatively peaceful countries who saw an opportunity and a responsibility to ease human suffering elsewhere. Canadians were prominent participants in both the small coalition of government actors, and the much larger coalition of non-governmental ones.

So roll up your sleeves, and put your educations to work! And as you do so, please don't forget to tell us what you're up to.

Thank you, and good luck in the adventures that lie ahead.