

“Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive”: this was the title of an album by the ambient/trip-hop duo Arms and Sleepers in 2006—about the same time most of you were beginning to contemplate which university you would choose, which program of study might suit you, and what career might best satisfy your talents, temperament and inclinations.

Today I expect that at least some of you—and a good number of your parents and supporters— are marveling at the distance you have traveled since then.

As you sat there, weighing one university against the other, good sense against peer pressure, fear of the unknown against desire for adventure, I’m not sure you would have said you were in a state of bliss. Such discussions in my own family sometimes ended in books being slammed shut and the question: “Yes, Dad, but whose life is it anyway?”

But to be poised at the opening of a new phase in your life, to have choices about that phase, to dream of your future without fear you will be proven naïve for thinking you have one: this is an experience of privilege; and despite the superficial anguish, I know you will today recall the pregnant quality, the powerful promise, of that moment. “Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive.”

Those of you who love literature and whose tastes don’t incline to ambient/trip-hop music know that the actual source for this quotation is the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth. In *The Prelude* he

remembers the excitement he felt in France at the start of the French Revolution. The lines are very famous:

O pleasant exercise of hope and joy!
For great were the auxiliars which then stood
Upon our side, we who were strong in love!
Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive,
But to be young was very heaven! (x, 690-4)

You are on the whole “young” and gathered here today in a differently “pleasant exercise of hope and joy”— the ceremony of graduation. But there is a good deal more to the parallel. Wordsworth’s lines evoke a powerful sense of community—“our side,” he says, is “strong in love”—confronting, even leading, a far-reaching and radical human transformation. What invigorates is the prospect of doing something great, particularly in partnership with others. The goal is a new human dispensation, a society which is not just an agglomeration of individuals, but an organism “strong in love.”

It may be true that in every age the young feel a need to reconsider and reconfigure the human order. But there are compelling reasons to regard the present as an “age of revolution” every bit as critical as that which began with the American Revolution in the last quarter of the Eighteenth Century, included the French Revolution, and continued for approximately 75 years.

I was recently in Brazil as part of the Governor General's educational mission to that country. In a meeting with Brazilian officials I was struck by the curious mixture of assurance and abjection that defined our Canadian position. We were assured (forgivably, perhaps) in our assumption that we had advantages that our Brazilian colleagues might want—a mature and world-class university system, for example. But we were abject in our awareness that this advantage is unlikely to continue much longer, that soon the tables will turn and institutions and countries like our own will need to adapt to a new world order—one in which they are not dominant.

About a month earlier I had witnessed a similar scene playing itself out in England, during the British Council's annual conference on Global Higher Education, as a British cabinet minister addressed delegates from 120 countries. Oddly oblivious to the reality that he was addressing representatives from the very market he wished to exploit, he spoke at length about the need to cultivate and sell abroad the British "brand" in higher education. The irony was profound and I imagine not lost on delegates from Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa—the BRICS countries, as they have come to be known. Such nations in the so-called developing world, having shaken off political subservience and begun to realize their economic potential, are being invited back into relationships with their previous masters, in a new role as customers—customers increasingly vital to the economies of those formerly dominant states. Assurance and abjection again, in that British cabinet minister as in our delegation in Brazil.

These are symptoms of a quiet revolution under way across the globe, realigning power and wealth, complicating relationships that have seemed settled since the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, challenging the hegemony of received ideas, of what one might call normative Europeanness, and making it certain that the new world coming will not be predictable on the basis of the old.

What fuels my own sense of bliss at this moment is the feeling that many of you are open to active engagement with the globe not only as it is right now, but also as it is in the process of becoming. Many of you have been active in addressing suffering, violence and inhumanity across the world, and we should be very proud of this, of the way in which a “without borders” sensibility has taken hold in your generation, giving life to formal initiatives aimed at serving the world in difficult times.

The most influential model for these, Medecins Sans Frontieres (Doctors Without Borders), has a strong McMaster connection, as many of you know. Dr. James Orbinski, who had been a medical student at this university, was a founding member of Doctors Without Borders Canada in 1990.

Dr. Orbinski is also connected with another organization that is very strong at this university: Engineers Without Borders, whose McMaster branch was last year named Chapter of the Year by the national

organization. As an institution we have a distinguished history of engagement with global problems. Our Faculty of Social Sciences is host to the McMaster Institute on Globalization and the Human Condition, established in 1998 to study globalizing processes and the way they bear upon our lives, our communities, and our environment.

In the Faculty of Humanities we have a combined Honours program and Minor in Peace Studies, an offshoot of the Centre for Peace Studies which came into being during the Cold War when scholars and physicians became concerned about the prospects for human survival. Today the Centre concerns itself with “war and peace, violence and nonviolence, conflict and conflict transformation.” Arching over these and many other globally-oriented activities at McMaster is our institutional membership in United Nations Academic Impact—which commits us to the practice of higher education and research in support of the global good. Several years ago we dedicated ourselves, through education, to the realization of the Millennium Goals of the United Nations.

Today all the talk is of “internationalizing” higher education. This is a stated aim of our provincial government, our federal government, and of governments and educational institutions around the world.

Depending where you are situated on the globe there are varying degrees of consensus on this issue. The Canadian consensus is very strong: our future lies in our international commerce, particularly in knowledge-based industries, including higher education.

But it is interesting to note there is far less commitment to the idea of internationalization—in higher education at least—in countries of the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean, for example. My stories about Brazil and the British conference provide a clue as to why this is the case: the fact is simply that for countries like our own, and even more so for Britain and the European nations, successfully finding new markets for their educational brands is a matter of survival. For the BRICS group, in contrast, partnership with mature nations and institutions helps to speed up a process of national development which would likely occur without partnerships, if perhaps a little more slowly. What has become essential for some nations is merely convenient for others.

I say all this to indicate that while I could not be more encouraging of your every move to be a force for global change, it is important that you not be so transported by the promise of this moment—by the exhilaration of being “strong in love” with your global brothers and sisters—that you fail to notice that your own interests may be different from theirs.

In the face of so much global suffering it is tempting to come bearing the gift of answers, rather than the more valuable gift of questions; it is tempting to be assured rather than abject in your approach to others. And more problematically, even, you can find yourself engaged in remaking the other in your own image, failing to understand unfamiliar

cultures, economies and nations in terms other than *a lack* of what is valued and celebrated in your own paradigms.

To speak only of the internationalizing of higher education: what progress does it represent if we simply strengthen the normalizing claims of Western rationality as a way of interpreting and regulating others? I remember not so long ago when one first began to hear talk of an emerging “knowledge economy,” a discourse that now dominates our understanding of global commerce and culture. Relevant though it is at some level, one has to wonder about the extent to which it helps or hinders the growth and prosperity in developing regions, where industrial production on the Fordist model remains critical.

One gratifying outcome of the Brazil trip is confirmation that 12,000 Brazilian students will come to Canadian universities as part of their own government’s Science Without Borders program, which will provide scholarships to 100,000 Brazilian students to study at the best universities around the world. The program will have a major impact—not just on Brazil and its economic growth, but on the universities fortunate enough to host scholarship students. For us in Canada and here at McMaster, there is potential for self-renewal and development, as our own paradigms and assumptions are challenged by the presence of outstanding students from Brazil.

That must be the foundation of our engagement with the future and the globalized condition from which that future is inseparable: traffic across

borders must flow in both directions, as must the benefits of engagement. Without that, a new world community “strong in love” as Wordsworth puts it, will be an illusion, and the expectant bliss of our present moment will go unfulfilled.

To all of you, my warmest best wishes for the lives and careers you will make in the strange and unfamiliar territory that begins at the doors of this building.