

Convocation Speech – June 2011

Mr. Chancellor, Madam Provost, Dr. Smith, distinguished faculty, graduating students, ladies and gentlemen:

Within the walls of this auditorium today, graduands, you are both in and out of time, and the medieval rituals in which we all have been engaged drive home that message: for now, for this few hours, your past is concluded and your future is not yet demanding attention. You can bask in the pleasure of your achievement, in the fellowship of your classmates and friends, and in the adoration (or perhaps relief) of your parents and family. Congratulations for all you have done.

Convocation is a gathering of the university family, and with this ceremony today we welcome you permanently into membership of that family. And in that respect this event is not unlike a wedding, which thought prompts me to remark: In case you hadn't noticed, since your admission we have only been engaged. The results of your final examinations have provided good evidence of an honourable intention, and so today we have tied the knot which binds you to McMaster forever.

"Forever": you notice I find myself again looking into the future—so much for being both in and out of time. The future awaits and you must go from here and meet it; or perhaps I should say that for each of you *a* future awaits and you must go forth and make it. That rewording is important because my theme today is not that your future is predetermined, rather that when you leave this hall you will each be agents in history, relatively free, with power to shape both your own destiny and the destiny of our planet. If you are able to find within yourselves the will to do that—and I expect you shall do so, in one way or another—the real question to be answered must be *how*: not "by what practical means" but "in what spirit" will you approach the world? If I were to try your patience and push again my wedding analogy, I might think of quoting from the marriage service to remind you that your agency in history is "not by any to be enterprised, nor taken

in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly...but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly..." That would be going too far, but the graduates of this fine university, in taking up their agency in the world, do have responsibilities that must be discharged. With the privilege of higher education, and in particular a McMaster education, comes the expectation that your future actions will redound to the benefit of those less privileged, of humanity at large, and through all of that, to the credit of your alma mater. The future which you make for yourselves is ours also.

So, in what spirit *should* you approach that future? I know that on occasions like this people are given to hyperbole. What do you say when you appear on the stage at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood, ready to accept an academy award? We all know the speech that is prescribed, and it runs something like this: "I just want everyone to know that if you just want something hard enough, and if you work for it hard enough, you will succeed. That's what happened with me, and look: here I am!" By how many callow new faces in Hollywood have these words been spoken over the years? (Might this have been Christina Aguilera at the Grammys? I'm not sure). There's a version of the same speech that is not infrequently given from the convocation stage, and of course I would applaud such a positive message. It is certainly true that in some cases sheer, disciplined determination does bring success—but certainly not always, despite the new actor's claim to the contrary. Today I want to recommend to you the virtue of a different kind of self-discipline, and perhaps it won't reverberate for you quite so well today—when you all feel, as is your right, like queens and kings of the world—but I hope that in time you will come to understand better its importance.

I was recently in Beijing to attend a world summit of university presidents, part of which was a special session focusing on the issue of the universities and social responsibility. On show there were, as you can imagine, many different understandings of what we mean by the phrase "social responsibility." Indeed, one was struck by the lack of unanimity even on how we would define a university! But one intervention in particular has stayed with me in the weeks

since my return, and this came from Dr. Junichi Hamada, President of Tokyo University, who indicated that in the days since the earthquake and tsunami devastated the northeastern part of his country, Japanese society has markedly lost confidence in science and technology. And in consequence a gap has opened up between the universities and the public at large; where once the two were joined in a relationship of optimism, confidence and high aspirations, there is now skepticism and doubt.

In part this news was easy to understand and not surprising. The failure of engineers and scientists successfully to contain the crisis at the Fukushima Nuclear Power Plant was bound to provoke a collapse of confidence, and as the days have turned into weeks and as prior assurances about the safety of people living in close proximity to the plant have been shown to be unfounded, cynicism has proliferated. But still I found myself wondering why the fact of the earthquake and the tsunami themselves should affect public confidence in science. After all, while it is true that scientists may be able on rare occasions to predict disasters, and quite commonly to advise on preparing for them, it remains the case that science can no more prevent natural disasters occurring than Cnut, the Danish King of England could successfully command the tide to halt and not wet his feet and robes. I am sure most of you know that story.

It is a story that is frequently misunderstood, though. In our modern age, Cnut is usually cited as an example of early western megalomania: apparently, what we know—namely, that the seas will listen to no man—*he* did not know, being drunk on power and deluded by religious superstition. Or so the popular version goes. If you read the one extant more-or-less contemporary account of Cnut's watery encounter, however—that of the 12th century chronicler, Henry of Huntingdon, in his *Historia Anglorum*—the story is very different. The point of Cnut's actions is to remind his courtiers and clerics of nothing less than the *limitations* of human knowledge and human power. Once his feet are wet and he has made his point, he literally takes off and hangs up his crown.

The moral of this story, told eight hundred years ago, is that there are very significant limitations to the human ability to achieve, and that in some contexts our desires and aspirations—as well as our technology—can be irrelevant. At the conference in Beijing I wondered whether the public disillusionment of which Dr. Hamada spoke was not in some way connected to—perhaps nurtured by—the extravagance with which universities themselves occasionally frame their aspirations, making claims to an unrealistic level of influence and effectiveness. What happened to Cnut on the beach at Bosham in West Sussex was natural and expected, and it could only have been cause for humiliation and embarrassment if he had previously asserted that he *could* make the sea concede to his will. I am not suggesting that science in Japan (or anywhere else for that matter) is subject to the level of self-delusion embodied in the popular conception of Cnut; but I *am* wanting to sound a warning to you to eschew the false certainties and spurious confidence in progress which is one of the defining attributes of our time.

I notice that Dr. Hamada has posted on the web a very fine essay on his university and its public responsibility. There he makes claims with which I would certainly agree: namely, that in our turbulent and changing age “Academia is expected to sketch the outline” of “a new form of society” and “mark the path to reach that goal.” This is a proper ambition, and if you were to read the essay, you would notice that is expressed in terms appropriately modest in a post-Fukushima context. There are no grand claims for the ability of science to conquer all challenges. But it has to be noted, nevertheless, that Dr. Hamada expresses the aspirations of the academy through a linear metaphor: we are on a “path,” which must lead somewhere, and the presumption we are invited to make is that where it leads will in some sense be better than where we are at present. This kind of thinking used to be called “evolutionary meliorism” because it assumed that we are always in the process of becoming better than we were, of being more powerful, more insightful, more in command of nature and its intractable forces.

Is this the spirit in which you should approach your future? Optimism certainly has its place—an important place—in building our culture and society, in underwriting scientific speculation and investigation, in driving forward to solve the problems of humanity through research and humanitarian work. There is undoubtedly truth in what the young actor says when he asserts that if you believe in yourself or in a cause anything is possible. But it is only a partial truth and a sentimental one at that. On an occasion like this, as you celebrate what you have achieved, what you know, and what you can do, it is important to hold yourself to the discipline of acknowledging what you don't know, what you may not be able to do, and the possibility that some achievements may remain forever beyond your grasp.

Why is this so? We habitually talk as if the great achievements of humankind were all the result of determination, resolve, and the single-minded pursuit of an idea. Even if that is true, a countervailing point is that single-mindedness lies also at the base of our greatest man-made tragedies, and that is why skepticism and doubt must go with you into your futures.

I will end by recalling the late Jacob Bronowski, mathematician, biologist and historian of science, who in a famous television series aired in 1973, bent down to lift from a pond at Auschwitz a wet handful of the ashes of the holocaust dead. This is what he said:

“Science is a very human form of knowledge. We are always at the brink of the known, we always feel forward for what is to be hoped. Every judgment in science stands on the edge of error, and is personal. Science is a tribute to what we can know although we are fallible. In the end the words were said by Oliver Cromwell: ‘I beseech you, in the bowels of Christ, think it possible you may be mistaken.’”

Take note of Bronowski's first assertion: “Science is a very human form of knowledge.” The essence of all human activity is that it “stands on the edge of error,” is limited, “personal,” partial, potentially mistaken. And lest we imagine that only scientists are prone to think themselves, their opinions and their

hypotheses infallible, pause to consider the number of artists, writers and musicians who have held and acted upon inflexible, repugnant and inhumane views. Remember the antisemitic ramblings of the poet Ezra Pound, Martin Heidegger's statements on the "inner truth and greatness" of the National Socialist movement in Germany in 1935, and the case of Richard Strauss, described by Thomas Mann as a "Hitlerian composer." Remember furthermore that Adolf Hitler himself was both a monster and an avid painter of landscapes. Of the same mind as Oliver Cromwell, Sir Laurens van der Post wrote not so long ago that "human beings are perhaps never more frightening than when they are convinced beyond doubt that they are right," and in that fundamental aspect scientist and poet are "of imagination all compact," if I might borrow and adapt the famous line from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

The university exists not only to foster the finding of new knowledge or the creation of new art, music and literature. Its purpose is also to help us understand these things as products of the human mind and imagination, *and through them* to grasp what it means to be human, standing always in history and on the edge of error. Perhaps that latter is the most difficult of our tasks both within the university and after we leave it, for the simple and paradoxical reason that to progress in any way we must acknowledge that we, too, stand always in an intimate, "personal" relation to self-delusion and ignorance.

Graduands, your future must be a triumph not of the personal will, but of humane wisdom. And in that spirit I congratulate you, wish you well, and commend you to the years ahead.

Thank you.