

Patrick Deane

President and Vice-Chancellor

Convocation Speech for 16 November 2012

Your Royal Highness, Mr. Chancellor,  
Distinguished guests, graduating students, ladies  
and gentlemen.

It is a great pleasure to be able to speak to you today on what is for everyone a wonderful occasion. For our new graduates this ceremony represents the culmination of years of assiduous work, challenges, difficulties and triumphs, and it opens the way to a future that will no doubt contain more of the same. These, in various measure and along with loves, longings, fears and friendships, are the ingredients of any life, however and wherever it is lived. I know you will apply yourselves to that future with at least the same strength of character that has brought you to this point; but in approaching what lies before you, you now carry the benefit of your McMaster

education, all that it signifies and all that it can make happen.

Take note of the way in which that last sentence ended. Several years ago, during an advancement campaign for the university, we took as our theme a quotation from the twentieth-century Irish poet, William Butler Yeats: “Education is not the filling of a vessel, but the lighting of a fire.” All of us gathered on the platform here today, and all the members of the McMaster community that we represent, subscribe to the view that education is nothing if it is not a spur to activity, the awakening and nurturing of the power within each of you to think and to act beyond your present circumstances—to imagine what at present may be unimaginable and to do what at present may seem impossible.

Your education has given you no guarantees, I want to say to you today, but it has given you power—a formidable power to grasp and shape your circumstances and your future. The parchments you have received today, the hoods which have been placed over your heads: these are the static symbols of something that is by its very nature active, destabilizing, and—when we are living to our full human potential--perennially

unsatisfied. You might want to call this thing “the habit or the spirit of inquiry,” but that leaves out another important consideration—namely, our desire to command and shape that which our habit of inquiry makes us want to understand.

All great achievements one might say are in some way the result of the active and inquiring mind acting in concert with the shaping hand: in a great work of sculpture—a torso by Rodin, for example, or the Great Sphinx at Giza—we see the result of an intellectual interrogation of the possibilities of the medium expressing itself through the physical act of creation. Similarly, Frederick Banting discovered how to isolate and extract insulin when basic science and theoretical speculation on the cause and treatment of diabetes was supplemented by practical knowledge gleaned from his experience as a surgeon.

What I said of your parchments and your hoods I would say also of your degrees. They are tangible things and they have practical purposes, but they are also symbolic of something paradoxically more real, more enduring, and more empowering to you—and that is the capacity to encounter your world and your future with the full force of your person and your intellect, and through that

encounter to shape and change what lies before you.

When he admitted you to your degrees, the Chancellor noted that he was in the process conferring on you certain rights and privileges pertaining to those degrees. This is a very ancient formula, derived from the earliest days of European universities, and it signifies that as a new member of the convocation of the University, you acquire a voice and (directly or indirectly) a role in the governance and direction of the institution—one which was just drawn attention to by our representative from the McMaster Alumni Association.

I want to remind you that with rights and privileges come obligations. There is an old Spanish proverb according to which God gave mankind this message: “Take what you want. Take what you want, and pay for it.” The right to membership brings with it the obligation to uphold and support not only the University, but also and more critically the work to which the university is dedicated. And that work is to serve the good of society by the exercise of the inquiring mind and the shaping hand. Our hope today is that you will move on to the next stage in your lives

profoundly capable—and vividly *aware* that you are capable—of addressing the great challenges of our society and of our planet.

This is your obligation. According to a study last year from Harvard University and the Asian Development Bank, only 6.7% of the world's population has a college degree. In the United States last year 42% of 25- to 64-year olds had achieved higher education, whereas across the OECD countries the figure was 31%. Here in Ontario, as many of you know, our government has dedicated itself to creating the conditions that will enable the province to reach a 70% attainment rate. Think of yourself as part of the 70% (or even the 42% or the 31%) and the privilege of holding a degree will not seem so considerable. However, think of yourself as part of the 6.7% and you will feel inordinately privileged; you will feel furthermore the obligation that comes with that privilege.

I suppose my point is that the privilege of an education brings with it the obligation to lead. I am a little embarrassed to say that, however, because there are few words bandied around in our culture that have been so drained of meaning as has “leadership.” We have even become used to

thinking of leadership as a teachable subject in itself; I wish it were not true, but I recently heard someone described as “a leader in the field of leadership.” I am reminded of a character in *The Simpsons* some years ago, who received an award for “outstanding achievement in the field of excellence.” Talk of leadership so often lands us in a jungle of such tautologies.

In the last several months we have had many opportunities to ponder and compare examples of leadership in the political realm. The U.S. Presidential election attracted the attention of Canadians in a way our own elections rarely do and it provided two starkly different models for leadership, two very different visions for the American people—indeed for the world; in Ontario, the resignation of our Premier has required the Province to focus on leadership as both a matter of record and a prospect for the future, while in China a very different political system has entered into a challenging but well-choreographed period of defining leadership and naming leaders.

In Ukraine an election was recently concluded from which the heroine of the “orange revolution”, the former Prime Minister, Yulia Tymoshenko,

was excluded by virtue of languishing in jail, having been convicted on charges and in a process that have been condemned by the Council of Europe. Also in Europe the German Chancellor Angela Merkel finds herself challenged to act both for the good of her own country and the broader good of Europe, and is in the process reviled by some of those she seeks to help.

And—less dispiritingly—in India a few days ago the former persecuted dissident and now Burmese opposition leader, Aung San Suu Kyi, made her first visit in 40 years. Ms. Suu Kyi will be visited by President Obama later this month—further confirmation of her changed fortunes as person and as leader, and of her nation's altered position in the constellation of states.

Aung San Suu Kyi provides a brilliant example of leadership understood not as an external attribute but as a condition of intellectual and personal cultivation. Even under house arrest for 15 years she was paradoxically able to fashion a new future for her country, one which we now see taking shape but which was for a long time realizable only in her imagination. Ms. Suu Kyi, like Nelson Mandela before her, testifies to the enigmatic nature of leadership (its indomitability and its link

to self-effacement), and also to the diversity of its forms.

I want to conclude by observing that, notwithstanding the variety of its manifestations, successful leadership has at its heart the same capacity for thinking and making, analyzing and shaping, that is the essence and enduring part of your McMaster education. We do not expect that every graduate today will make headlines in the world press, nor that all will aspire to and eventually achieve high office. What *is* expected, though, is that confident in your capability, you will go through life applying your inquiring mind to your circumstances, and with your hands making this glorious, piebald, complex, tragic and perpetually changing world a better place—in and for itself as the planet on which we are fortunate enough to find ourselves, and for all of us who travel together on its course through space and time.