

Convocation speech: Friday 18 November 2011

It is always invigorating and a privilege to talk to students about themselves, their work, their approach to the world and their prospects for the future—and never more so than at graduation, when the President has the rare opportunity to have something like the last word. And it is the last word in a conversation that in one way or another has been going on since each of you first entered your degree program. I should note that some of you here today are the first graduates from brand new programs at McMaster: the Master's programs in Gender Studies and Feminist Research and in Global Health, for example. Amongst you is the first student to complete the Water Without Borders Program, an initiative of the United Nations University; and also the first PhD graduate from the new field of Radiation Sciences—Radiation Biology. Today we celebrate the individual achievements of all of you, as well as the irrepressible vitality of the academy as it continues to open up new fields for research and study.

Almost everyone in this auditorium has, at one time or another, been part of the sort of conversation that begins: “where were you when.....?” “Where were you when the twin towers fell ten years ago on September 11th, 2001?”, for example. I know where I was on that occasion. I was sitting in my office at the University of Winnipeg on the telephone to someone at the university's bank, who suddenly interrupted her long and complicated description of why some problem had occurred and said: “My God—something is happening in New York City—a plane has crashed into the World Trade Centre.” I hung up, found a television, already surrounded by numbers of dumbfounded students, and saw what had happened. In the hour that followed we watched first the South Tower fall, and then the North Tower. The experience was utterly unforgettable, and I recall how profoundly close I felt to the students that day: although separated from them in age by nearly thirty years, and like each of them having been brought to that place and that moment by a unique history of decisions and coincidences, I felt one with them in deep confusion, apprehension, and an inescapable sense of vulnerability.

Our celebratory mood contrasts with that sombre morning a decade ago. For each of you this ceremony signals a life shift, the conclusion of one

phase and the beginning of another. And these proceedings—a calling-together of the university community—bind you to each other and to McMaster for the rest of your lives. When by chance or destiny you meet up with one another in the future you will answer in identical ways the question, What were you doing on November 18th, 2011? “That was graduation day,” you will say.

But what else might you say? To help think about how you might answer that question in the future, let me ask it another, inverted way: what was *the world* doing on your graduation day, November 18th, 2011? Will you be able to answer the question? Did you this morning take note of the news, reflect upon the world into which you will carry your new degree and in which you will seek to be successful? And did you pause to think about what your success ought to look like, shaped by our specific historical coordinates, in the prevailing (and shifting) global equilibrium of human happiness and suffering, poverty and wealth, altruism and greed, hatred and love? If you did not do so I invite you to think about it now, because just as this ceremony binds you to one another and to the university, it more importantly binds you to the world and to your responsibilities in that world.

Today, it is true, we can be grateful that there is no headline-commanding single atrocity before us, as there was on September 11, 2001. The world is, however, no less atrocious a place, though for reasons partly having to do with the way in which world events are mediated to us, that fact is not allowed to claim our attention. There are principally two stories being told by the media about the current moment in history: both are parables of a sort, and they are complementary to each other. The one is optimistic and reassuring though with hints of darker possibilities, and the other is fatalistic and frightening but with a promise of redemption. A kind of narratological yin and yang. The first story is that of the so-called “Arab Spring,” which purports to teach us that despots cannot prevail indefinitely, and that sooner or later people will rise up and unseat them. Apparently equally inevitable is the development which follows, and this is the souring of the revolutionary spirit, as those who have taken power reveal themselves disturbingly similar to those they have displaced. Recent events in Libya, for example, have been relayed to us according to this paradigm, the humiliation and alleged summary execution of Muammar Gaddafi

raising questions about the fitness to rule of the very people credited with liberating the country from his despotism. As I said, the story is optimistic but with a dark aftertaste, and it is calculated to titillate us in two ways: one, by playing to our sentimental belief in the inevitability—indeed the irrepressibility—of our democratic urges, and two, by reinforcing our suspicion that our human natures are too fallible and violent for democratic society.

The other parable in which we are caught up is economic. The concept of “sovereign debt” was until six months ago obscure to most of us. Now, every day, we not only ponder the prospect of whole nations defaulting on their loans, we are even getting used to the idea that nations may follow one another into bankruptcy in a kind of “Greek Autumn.” I recently heard a commentator on the CBC rattle off the way in which the economic dominoes might fall: first Greece, then Spain, then Italy, and if Italy, then France and then even, he offered with pro forma hesitation, Great Britain! It would seem that in contrast to 2001, when humanity was urged to ponder the singularity and exceptionality of tragic phenomena, in 2011 we must contemplate chain reactions—of democratic fervour in the case of the Arab Spring, of financial collapse in the case of the Greek Autumn.

I observed that the depressing narrative of the European financial collapse, as it is told by the media, often seems to contain a promise of redemption, and in that last word the suggestion of moral or religious consolation is intentional: for the first time, the hard-working, debt-ridden person in the street is being allowed—indeed invited—to see that sovereign finance is in reality no different from his or her household finance. What was formerly the curse and particular destiny of the oppressed consumer now turns out to be an immutable law applicable to all participants in commerce, whether they are individuals or nation states: if you live beyond your means for an extended period, disaster must follow. Of particular interest, though, is the way in which commentators on the international crisis are less horrified by what it may portend—ghastly levels of unemployment and economic deprivation in what were formerly nations of substance and sophistication—than they are interested in the way in which financial apocalypse may provide an opportunity for the absolution of past mistakes and education about the risks of unrestrained borrowing and spending. The oddly consoling point seems to be that at one level or another “we” have

deserved this, whoever “we” are. The language points towards a need for atonement. It is worth noting here that to contest who “we” are, and therefore who must atone for the world’s economic woes, has been at the heart of the Occupy movement: are “we” the 1% or the 99%? The answer matters.

Certainly, “we” are all in history together, and my point in drawing your attention to these two narratives about the world we presently inhabit is twofold. First, I want to remind you that despite our natural desire to believe we are insulated from disruptive and destructive forces at work in the world—witness the amount of time devoted to public discussions about Canada’s immunity to the spreading contagion of the European credit crisis—this cannot, by any logic, be true. Second—and this is a prerequisite for meaningful engagement on your part with the world—I want to underline the extent to which we “make” (in the sense of “form”) problems in the language we use to talk about them.

Why is this important? Because the language or the narrative we employ in defining a problem also suggests, determines and perhaps limits the possible options available for resolving it. Given what I have said so far about the global financial crisis, it is appropriate to consider as an example of this our use of the word “innovation,” which is proposed to us as the key to weathering the economic storm. In almost every area of our lives, innovation is held out as a panacea. “Innovation,” observed the late Steve Jobs, “distinguishes between a leader and a follower.” One such leader, Bill Gates, has expanded on this view in language reminiscent of Winston Churchill: “Never before in history has innovation offered promise of so much to so many in so short a time.” This is a heady claim: profoundly optimistic about the present and future prospects of human society, and unquestioning in according to innovation an innate and transhistorical value for good. The careers of both Steve Jobs and Bill Gates would appear to corroborate the claim, and with their example abroad it is little wonder that a global consensus has emerged in support of innovation as the cure for all ills. Dissenting voices are few and they are always on the margin: there is the fashion designer Coco Chanel, for example, who exclaimed “Innovation! One cannot be forever innovating. I want to create classics.”

Chanel’s point draws attention to one problem with innovation, namely that ongoing change denies human beings something that they crave:

constancy, and a sense of more than merely provisional value. She also triggers an important question: namely, are there orders of human experience and activity that should be exempt from the drive towards reinvention?

The truth is that contemporary use of the word “innovation” is quite restrictive, notwithstanding the air of radicalism that its proponents often wish to communicate. The American educator Peter Drucker offers this accurate definition of the dominant understanding: “Innovation is the specific instrument of entrepreneurship. The act that endows resources with a new capacity to create wealth.” As currently espoused therefore, innovation by and large is assumed to occur within a socio-economic framework the fundamental elements of which it does not challenge. It is in that sense profoundly conservative, which may explain why people and nations seeking national and cultural transformation through business innovation find themselves peculiarly dissatisfied. The trickle-down and knock-on benefits of economic growth through innovation may well have salutary effects in the realm of social value, but such effects are certainly not inevitable, and as we’ve witnessed, certainly not enough.

A more far-reaching and potentially transformative concept—and one oddly unfashionable these days in discussions of economic distress—is *imagination*. I was recently heartened to attend the Woodbridge Lecture here on the McMaster campus and to hear Mark Chamberlain—a very well-known local entrepreneur and proponent of innovation—arguing for an understanding of innovation that involved the full exercise of the imagination and of human empathy. Similarly encouraging was a recent publication from the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto that argued for a similar view: “the goal of education in our increasingly-specialized and knowledge-intensive world,” wrote the authors, Roger Martin and Jennifer Riel, “must be to teach the meta-skill of *thinking about thinking*.” Perhaps it is indeed true that as Daniel Pink has suggested, “the scales are tipping away from what it used to take for people to get ahead—logical, linear, left-brain and spreadsheet-type abilities—in favour of abilities like artistry, empathy, and big-picture thinking, which are becoming more valuable.” In that persistent focus on what it takes “for people to get ahead,” however, there is an indication that Pink has not quite left behind the model of what Martha Nussbaum has

called “education for economic growth.” We should not be surprised at that. “Education for economic growth,” after all, has become the rallying cry of governments across the globe, and it is now a largely unchallenged assumption that increased levels of education and increased participation in higher education especially are essential to any nation’s success in the highly competitive, knowledge-based global economy.

What I would say about “education for economic growth” is what I said about innovation as presently understood: it is essentially conservative, largely because it is assumed to occur within a socio-economic model which it is not inclined to question. It follows therefore that those who seek radical and far-reaching social change through such a conception of education—like those who view innovation as the key to our brave new world—will inevitably be let down. Oddly enough, their disappointment is in some ways guaranteed, because while governments and corporate leaders in our country and across the western world have been relentless in their espousal of “education for economic growth,” the fact is that universities (and McMaster no less than any other) continue on the whole—whether by conscious choice or by inertia—to be committed to education for citizenship, democracy, and human development. And in that project it is not innovation that will carry the day, but *imagination*, the true source of revolutionary and transformative thinking. Jacob Bronowski, the mathematician and historian of science, has noted that “It is important that students bring a certain ragamuffin, barefoot irreverence to their studies; they are not here to worship what is known, but to question it.”

Last week in England from a group called the Cultural Learning Alliance there appeared a new report entitled “*ImagineNation: The Case for Cultural Learning*.” This document, a direct response to the increasing emphasis being placed by the British government on education for economic growth, makes the point that learning with a focus on the imagination delivers economic benefits *as well as* qualitative enhancements to human life. It also fosters a spirit of ingenuity and real invention entirely unlimited by the kind of conservative socio-economic assumptions that go unchallenged in the entrepreneurs’ model of innovation. “The future prosperity of this country,” the authors write, “depends on the creativity of its citizens. Training of the hand, eye and ear is also training for the mind. Children and young people who are imaginative, articulate, and emotionally mature will

be more intellectually curious and physically inventive. They will seek innovation and change because they have been encouraged to express themselves and are confident in doing so.”

Your engagement with the world will I hope be of this sort. I hope that you will bring to current events and challenges a corrosive and imaginative intelligence that takes nothing for granted, that is revolutionary rather than merely innovative, and that refuses to accept without question the historical narratives and socio-economic models that are offered to us every day.

I suggested at the start that you graduates are bound to the rest of us by virtue both of our shared membership in this university community and of our simultaneous presence at this point in history. We look to you to be more than spectators in life. Indeed, we are deeply invested in what you will all accomplish as you turn your minds and imaginations loose to make this world more equitable, more peaceful, more sustaining, and in that sense, richer by far.