

Patrick Deane  
President and Vice-Chancellor, McMaster University  
Convocation Address, Fall 2013

We will soon emerge from Nobel Prize season. In the autumn of every year since 1901, the Swedish Academy, the Norwegian Nobel Committee and the Nobel Assembly of the Karolinska Institutet have handed out prizes in recognition of major scientific and cultural achievement. If my calculations are correct, since that first year, 847 individuals and 22 organizations have received Nobel Prizes or the Prize in Economic Sciences. Three of these winners have had an association with McMaster University: one was an alumnus, one was a professor here, and one was an alumnus who at the time the prize was awarded to his organization—Doctors Without Borders—was its President. This year, as you know, the Nobel Prize for Literature has come to Canada, to writer Alice Munro. This well-deserved honour has occasioned much celebrating in our country.

I have more than once pondered the question, “What do you do *after* you have won the Nobel Prize?” The empirical evidence seems to suggest that you just go on doing what you were doing before: more cutting-edge science, more brilliant writing, further efforts to bring peace to our planet, and so on. But I do think the question is an interesting one. After all, if to receive the Nobel Prize is to achieve a summit of sorts, where do you climb to after that? If the pursuit of awards and recognition is what drives you, you’re in a bit of a pickle. In case you’re wondering, it *is* possible to win the Nobel Prize a second time, but the number of people who have done so is very small.

The hypothetical question I’ve been pondering is relevant to all of you, of course. Today’s convocation celebration is one of those rituals which, like the Nobel presentations in Stockholm and Oslo, provides public recognition of achievement—yours—and also raises the question of what comes after, or should come after, for you and for all of us whose future you will have the power to affect. Convocation is very different in a number of ways, obviously, not least because it recognizes a very recent achievement on your part: the satisfying of degree requirements, through examinations or the submission and satisfactory defence of a dissertation, for example.

In contrast, it is not uncommon for decades to intervene between a discovery in Chemistry or Physics, say, and the awarding of a Nobel Prize to the person who made the discovery. Take for example Dr. Peter Higgs, who with a number of colleagues first theorized the existence of the so-called “God particle” (the Higgs boson) in 1964, but received the Nobel Prize for this discovery only this year. When McMaster’s Dr. Bertram Brockhouse won the 1994 Nobel Prize for Physics, he did so for a lifetime of research but particularly for work done at the Chalk River Laboratories in the 1950s, over forty years before.

How might we describe the intervening period in cases like that? Those many years between the hypothesis and the award represent a sort of proving time, when the value of the initial proposition emerges and is judged, either through experiment or by the evidence of its impact on subsequent science. I suppose that is why, for the most part, winners of the Nobel Prize are not tortured by my hypothetical question, “What comes after?” For them, “after” is paradoxically part of what came before, if you know what I mean.

If you’re a bit worried about where this leads in terms of yourselves and today’s convocation, you’ve successfully caught my drift. What if the Chancellor earlier in the ceremony had not said “I admit you to these degrees,” but instead promised to confer your degree on you in twenty years, after a proving time when the value of your years at McMaster might be more accurately judged by the impact you have made? I’m sure the question makes your blood run cold, but it is worth pondering. Just because your “after” has not already happened—because it is a *true* “after” and is as yet unknown and lies before you redolent with potential—does not mean it is irrelevant to the value of the degree you have received today.

That degree is only superficially recognition for what you have achieved in the recent past, and it is anything but a terminal point. If anything, it represents an obligation you have entered into to live a life of value, to prove yourselves as scientists, nurses, doctors, business people, artists, thinkers, and above all as human beings. If a degree were nothing more than tangible recognition of your having studied assiduously over a period of four or more years, I wonder whether we would celebrate its conferral with all this ceremony and grandeur, whether we would think it necessary for someone to come

in carrying a large silver mace to start the whole thing off? And would we want to have hundreds of people present to witness the occasion?

I think not. We do all this for the same reason that the Nobel Committee brings out Swedish and Norwegian monarchs to present its prizes: because what is being celebrated is of value not just to the person receiving the honour but to society at large. The big difference between those ceremonies and this one is that the Nobel prizes are about the *before*—about things already achieved—whereas our exercises today are much more about the *after*, about a future which I certainly do hope will see one or two of you cross the stage at Oslo or Stockholm, but *all* of you take what you have begun here at McMaster and build upon it throughout your lives to the greater good of all people and for the health of our world.

Your “proving time” now lies ahead of you, and this ceremony expresses the faith that the University has in you—our trust that you will continue to educate yourselves, that you will expand your understanding not only of your chosen field but of the broad spectrum of human concerns within which you will do your work, and that, above all, you will use the privilege of your education for the betterment of society and also—if only because society will collapse because of it—preservation of the natural world.

There are risks in this expression of trust. The Nobel Committees now insist on a lengthy “proving time” for good reason: in 1926 they awarded the Prize for Physiology or Medicine to the Danish scientist Johannes Fibiger for having discovered the existence of *spiroptera carcinoma*, a parasite that he claimed caused cancer. This was of course discredited by subsequent science.

But such cases, and the embarrassment that they cause to the institutions involved, bring home to us the importance of not fetishizing past achievement, but of concentrating instead upon what people are doing now and what they must do in the future for the good of us all.

When the writer Virginia Woolf (who did *not* receive the Nobel Prize, incidentally) exhorted us to avoid decorations and awards (“shiny pots given out by the headmaster,” as she called them), she was drawing attention to just this point: that when we accept

awards or overly estimate our achievements on occasions like this, we place ourselves in a peculiar kind of human jeopardy—one in which, as in the case of Johannes Fibiger, our past credit may with time be turned to discredit, or at least may underline subsequent failure.

To avoid being caught in that trap it is probably best, notwithstanding the fact that you do now have your degrees firmly in your hands, to regard the years ahead of you as your “proving time.” If you will allow me to return to the terms provided by my original question: you should not leave this hall as people entering the time *after*, but as people entering the time *before*.

This is just a way of saying that you’ve only just begun and that graduation should be not the end but the beginning of your highest aspirations. Your degree is just a stepping stone which, sooner or later, you should expect to leave behind. In that process you may find yourself driven by the pursuit of awards and rewards (although Virginia Woolf would discourage you from that, especially since it may make you beholden to the person or institution conferring the award); you may be driven by curiosity to know and discover more than you know today; or you may derive energy and excitement from the drive to serve and to help others.

As you sit here and ponder your future, you are at a tantalizing moment: great things are within your grasp, you are surrounded by support, and you have just received your degree as a token of the university’s trust and confidence in you.

Perhaps you remember the predicament of Tantalus in Greek myth, though: for his sins—with the details of which we need not be concerned today—he was condemned in perpetuity to reach out for some fruit which would then be withdrawn, or bend down for some water which would immediately recede before he could wet his lips.

My very good friend Jon, a physiologist, teacher, and active researcher, not so long ago spoke to me with self-deprecating humour about coming to terms with the realization that he would probably *not* win the Nobel Prize. His point was not that he had ever felt entitled to the Prize, or even that he believed his life’s work placed him in that league,

but rather that as a scientist he had always aspired to the highest achievement and set goals for himself that would be most valuable to his field and to the pursuit of knowledge. After an excellent career, and having made important contributions to our understanding of the way in which the human body works, he nevertheless had to acknowledge two things: one, that the summit of knowledge and insight towards which any honestly curious mind works will move perpetually out of reach, and two, that the real value of a career or a life is therefore unlikely to be found in some great terminal achievement or recognition.

That is the profound challenge that stands before you, and which you need not face today but which will confront you increasingly in the years to come. It is the challenge of finding value in human life without the certainty of external, eventual validation—of living as if you are in the *before*, while recognizing that for the most part you live in the mere present, a perpetual *after*.

Where we shall find value in those circumstances is the question I would leave you with today. Our Nobel laureate, Alice Munro, offers some guidance to us in this predicament. “The constant happiness,” she writes, “is curiosity.”

My very best wishes to you all.