About eighteen months ago, from this same podium, I spoke to a graduating class such as yours about the nature of the relationship between education and society. That occasion was informed by the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, which had recently appeared, and I wanted graduates to understand that the dark history of Residential Schools in this country was profoundly relevant to them—not only as human beings for whom the suffering of others must always be relevant, but as the beneficiaries of a quality education and as educators of the future.

While education—understood in the abstract as the cultivation of human potential—must always be a good thing, one cannot say the same for the institutions through which societies seek to educate their members. One lesson of the Residential Schools is that when education becomes deliberate acculturation it can be antithetical to the well-being of individuals and thwart their potential. Instead of building healthy communities characterized by diversity and respect for difference, such institutions compel homogeneity and encourage intolerance. They serve the political interests of the state, rather than the good of society, if I can put it that way.

That universities exist to serve society and state has been taken for granted in the Western academy at least since the Eighteenth Century, when belief in the value of building great public universities took hold in Germany and spread to North America. In the United States, the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890 established the so-called “land-grant” universities—for the public good, providing instruction in “agriculture and the mechanic arts” which would bring immediate economic benefit to the community, as well as education in the traditional liberal arts and sciences which would empower the individual and in the long term redound to the benefit of society at large.

The Canadian university system is overwhelmingly a public system. The country’s top 15 research universities—amongst which McMaster ranks first for research-intensity—are all public institutions, deriving significant operating revenues from the public purse and established under provincial legislation or (in at least two significant cases) Royal Charter. Eighty percent of all university research conducted in Canada occurs on U15 campuses (at a value of $8.5 billion a year); the fifteen confer more than 75% of all PhD degrees awarded in Canada (and therefore provide the bulk of the country’s research and development labour pool); and they contribute more than $36 billion to the Canadian economy every year.

These figures tell you two things about the system from which you are about to graduate. One is that a consensus exists in this country that higher education is vitally important for the national good and therefore worthy of public support at all levels; and the other is that those of us privileged to work and study in these
institutions have an obligation to mobilize what we have learned and what we have discovered for the good of our communities. And just as we derive moral as well as material support from our city, region, province and country, the benefits of our work should accrue in each of those spheres as well.

My hope today is that you will pause to think about the idea of community, about particular communities (such as the one you come from, the ones you have been a part of during your time at McMaster, the one you join by becoming a McMaster alumnus, the others you will enter when you leave here) and about how you can best take your lessons learned and skills developed in this community and turn them to the benefit of your new and future ones.

I made a distinction earlier between community, society, and state, and I implied that although educators and public educational institutions have obligations to all three, their relations with the state as a political entity can be seriously problematic—indeed, hazardous to the integrity of their mission. That is where the doctrine of academic freedom intervenes: as Wilhelm von Humboldt, credited as the great architect of the modern university, wrote in 1810, “the state must understand that intellectual work will go infinitely better without it” (Menand, etc. p3).

Because by and large such an understanding does prevail in Canada, universities enjoy a comparatively high degree of autonomy and have been able to establish themselves as privileged communities that are both places of learning and an ongoing experiment in social formation. By that I mean the following: by virtue of being self-governing, largely unencumbered by the challenges of non-academic communities, bound together by a clear and compelling mission, and afforded certain protections by society in order to do the work that society needs to have done, university communities have the potential to model a kind of social ideal. That is why institutions like McMaster commit themselves to progressive social values, to equity and inclusion, democratic and collegial processes, mutual respect linked to freedom of expression and to the freedom to protest: all commitments which are on the one hand understood to be necessary for optimal learning and discovery, and on the other the least that is owed by the university to the community at large, in acknowledgement of the privileged place which such institutions enjoy in the social and economic fabric of the country.

From that laboratory, then, emerge graduates like yourselves and innovations and insights of all kinds that will help the world beyond the university become better and brighter.

I noted earlier that McMaster was recently recognized as Canada’s most research-intensive university, and many of you graduating this morning/afternoon will have had a role in the groundbreaking research that is conducted in our institution every day. Your professors are world experts in a wide range of fields and are dedicating themselves to solving the world’s greatest challenges, from antibiotic resistance and cardiovascular disease, respiratory illness, autism and diabetes, to climate change,
globalization and the need for alternative energy sources. In the McMaster nuclear reactor scientists are developing nuclear tools for medical diagnosis and treatment, providing the world’s largest supply of radioisotopes for the treatment of prostate cancer, and assaying turbine engine blades for every passenger jet engine operating in North America. And now, thanks to a number of very generous gifts from our Chancellor, McMaster has also become a leading venue for the study and mitigation of a human challenge none of us can escape: aging. That is appropriate, given that our university is home to some of the world’s largest health cohort studies, following communities in this country and around the world to examine patterns in health and wellness from conception to death.

In all of these areas and many others besides, the McMaster community is serving the national and global community beyond its walls. Social analysis and innovation born here is bringing benefit to communities elsewhere; studies in culture and history are deepening the global understanding of what it is to be human; and creativity fostered on our campus ripples outwards, enriching life here and abroad. The work of McMaster, in short, is to advance the health and well-being of human beings and communities in Canada and across the world. And that is a singular goal, to which all our various disciplines contribute and in service of which they come together.

In closing, though, I want to talk about all of you as the critical means by which the work of this university community is mobilized to help create a brighter world. As I have already noted, many of you have played important roles in the research enterprise here at McMaster, and in that sense you have already made an impact, especially if you have been involved in community engaged research. Probably more of you have had the benefit of experiential learning opportunities in the Hamilton community—co-op and clinical placements, internships, service learning and so on—through which I hope you have come to understand the extent to which your personal growth and prosperity has a symbiotic relationship with the evolving health and well-being of society at large.

That is the main point which I wish to leave with you today. Despite my having noted several times that universities enjoy a privileged position to some extent apart from the communities in which they reside, it is a fact that whatever privileges they enjoy are conferred on them by society. Universities have autonomy because society believes it is important that they do so—not because it is their right, or because it has been ordained from on high, but because the complex ecosystem within which personal fulfillment and community progress are held together requires it.

Take care to remember that you are part of that ecosystem—something that is not necessarily easy to do on celebratory occasions like this, when standing out from the crowd is the measure of success. There are more than 1.7 million students studying in Canada this year in ninety-six universities. If you consider that overall only 28% of adults in this country have a university education, graduates like yourselves are
joining a minority segment of the population. Furthermore, you are graduating from an elite institution—McMaster University is currently ranked 66th out of approximately 24,000 universities world-wide, stands thus in the top 1% globally, and is one of only four Canadian institutions included in the world’s top 100. That means that you are today graduating with an enormous personal advantage, and compared with the majority of your peers in this country and across the globe, the odds of success are very much stacked in your favour.

It is vital to remember, however, that while your success reflects very positively on your individual abilities and talents, your success is also a communal triumph. It has been made possible by the many communities of which you are a part, beginning with your families and friends, extending into your school as well as this university community, and outwards into the global community where, tragically, the success of some comes at a price paid by others.

It is only reasonable, then, to ask you as you leave this place to see your personal fortune as inseparable from, and forever dedicated to, the communal good.

We are immensely proud of you and have great faith in your ability to make this a brighter world.