

Convocation Address – University of Guelph*

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Chancellor Mirvish, President Viccarino, my fellow students, faculty, parents and other guests. . .

- It is a terrific honour to be here this evening and to receive an honorary degree from the University of Guelph.
- It is “terrific” in every sense of the word:
 - as an *enthusiastic superlative* that I am so fortunate to receive this honour at the end of my formal career; that my colleagues at this university, whom I have so long valued and respected, should band together and recommend me for this degree, and that the University should accept their recommendation.
 - It is *terrific* in the sense of an *intensely momentous occasion*, because this is indeed a very great honour, something I never anticipated and value immensely.
 - And it is *terrific* in the sense of a moment of *actual terror* at the notion that I must now stand before you and share with you some thoughts that might be worthy of this occasion!
- I have had the privilege of pursuing an academic career in Canada. For me that has meant that the people of Canada have expected me to work long hours in their service but also have given me exceptional freedom and resources to define what that service should be.
- My career path has not been very linear.
 - I have had a long career in the natural sciences, but my first university degree was in Theatre and Cinema.
 - I was, briefly, a school teacher in a Newfoundland outport, and I came to science and veterinary medicine relatively late; I was 36 when I obtained my first job as an academic.
 - Back then I had just acquired the credentials of a specialist in veterinary pathology, a deep but very narrow niche in academic science. But perhaps the richest and most rewarding aspect of my career has been that, in the 30 years since that first academic appointment, and without changing jobs or institutions, I have been able to work within disciplines and sectors well beyond this narrow starting point.
 - My work has taken me into several branches of the natural sciences beyond veterinary pathology: into ecology and population biology, epidemiology and emerging infectious diseases.
 - It also has taken me into the social sciences, including sociology, human organizations, government policy and economics.

- And it has allowed me to work at many different levels of social engagement: at local, regional, national and international scales.
- In academia, as in other walks of life, very little is handed to you on a platter; you have to set your goals and pursue them with energy and determination. But there can be great rewards if you do so, and I feel immensely fortunate and privileged that I have been able to work across so many fields and sectors, and with so many wise and talented people.
- You, my fellow graduates, are mostly at the beginning of your careers, fresh out of the oven and ready for whatever is next. I am 30 years along that path and toward the end of mine, wondering what it all means. What can I share with you from this opposite end of the universe?
- My father graduated from medical school in the 1930s and, at a reception after his convocation ceremony, he fell into conversation with a physician who had graduated 40 years previously and who had been in practice ever since.
 - The elderly doctor was eager to hear about the latest innovations and my father held him spellbound for half an hour, bubbling over about the new wonders of the electron microscope, new ideas about the immune system and vaccines, and the amazing chemistry antibacterial drugs.
 - At the end of their conversation, the elderly doctor thanked my father for the tour of the latest understanding, and he made a parting comment. He said that this convocation from medical school was a unique moment in my father's career: it was the moment at which he had more knowledge and less wisdom than he would ever have again in his life.
- So, I've had about 35 years since my veterinary degree to try to gain some wisdom at the expense of knowledge.
 - I have certainly lost plenty on the knowledge side;
 - I am less sure about whether or not I have gained any equivalent in wisdom.
 - But I have been given many opportunities to see the world and to work within it. So, perhaps I can share with you a few thoughts about how we are and our common future.
- One of the great privileges of my life has been to come to know Canada fairly well.
 - Through childhood and some free-wheeling years in my early 20s, and from my work as director of a Canada-wide research institute, I have been able to spend what can be called *quality time* in every province and territory.
 - From this fairly thorough acquaintance, three aspects of Canada have come to haunt my thoughts.
- The first is what an improbable treasure this country really is, a huge land with a tiny human population, fewer people than live in Tokyo in a country 26 times larger than Japan, rich beyond imagining in everything the earth has to offer.
- The second is to be appalled at what terrible stewards of this land we have been, in the past and in the present.

- An international friend once tried to explain his country to me by saying it was governed by a universal cultural mantra: *"If it moves, shoot it; if it doesn't, chop it down."*
 - I don't know if this is a fair assessment of his country, but it is an apt description of our stewardship of Canada.
 - We seem to have no concepts of *limits* or *future* or *enough*, perhaps because we were offered such seemingly limitless bounty at the beginning.
 - As I once wrote in a poem, we seem now to be intent on 'digging up the ends of all of our rainbows, until the rain itself is gone.'
- The third aspect of Canada that haunts me is how disconnected we are from so many of the urgent, life-and-death issues confronting humankind on earth.
 - This is changing, I think, mostly because Canadians under 40 are getting fed up with political leadership that pretends these things don't exist and won't affect us, when manifestly they do and they will.
 - But indeed, Canada is only just now beginning to sense, really to feel, the issues that have shaped most of the rest of the world over the past 50 years.
 - These issues are massive, exponential increases in the human population and our collective use of resources, which in turn are driving climate change, water shortages, disease epidemics, and massive human displacements.
 - During these 50 years, the United States, for example, became a bilingual country in spite of its politics, because of the relentless press of economic and environmental migrants from Spanish-speaking America.
 - Africa is now moving to Europe because, for hundreds of thousands of Africans, the prospect of drowning is less awful than the prospect of remaining;
 - The homes and farms of half of the 160 million people of Bangladesh soon will be uninhabitable due to rising oceans. Where will they go?
- Canada has no credible national policies to deal with these global issues that soon will be our own.
 - We have no policy on the management of future human populations.
 - Our policy on immigration is more or less to prevent it, unless the immigrant is rich or seasonal. But very soon our population will increase vastly by immigration on a totally unprecedented scale. What will we do?
 - We have no national policy on food security, or on food production and food sufficiency and food distribution in a prolonged crisis.
 - Our national policy on resources is to sell them to the rest of the world as fast as possible, and to have no worries about how they are used or what we'll do when they run out.
- All of this can change, however, and it can change very quickly;
 - And you, I hope, will change it. But you had better act now and make it a life-long priority.

- We cannot prevent the rising tide of global realities from flooding across our land and our ways of living, but if we grasp the moment, make wise decisions and prepare for the broadly predictable future, we can restore our stewardship, discharge our responsibilities as global citizens and chart a civilized pathway through a what will certainly be challenging future.
- My final thought about the future is to urge you to reject the model and rhetoric of competition when it comes to the big, long-term issues posed by these global realities. Currently, competition is our dominant social paradigm.
 - Competition has its place as a short-term strategy in human relations. It brings us sharper ideas, smart phones, and better drugs.
 - But competition can never solve problems that require global governance; problems like climate change and the equitable distribution of wealth and resources.
 - These are the problems that will determine, in this century, whether or not our civilization can endure, and these problems can only be solved by a model of collaboration and consensus on a scale never before achieved by human kind.
 - Collaboration and consensus on this scale may require major revisions in our long-held concepts of such notions as national sovereignty, international tolerance, and taxation.
 - This will be the biggest challenge to your generation and its children, to find new modes of human collaboration and governance that are at once possible within the realm of real human behaviour and sufficient to assure the long-term persistence of humanity.
- So, you've got some work ahead of you!
 - Take that work to heart.
 - Let one of your personal goals be to make the world a better place, and start working on that goal right now.
 - Keep the difficult realities of a world of 9 or 12 billion people fully in your sights.
 - But also remember that there are 1.6 billion people in your generation around the world. If you can learn to harness that collective power, there is no problem you cannot manage and resolve.
- I congratulate you all on your hard-earned degrees and I look forward to your firm and informed guidance of Canada in the years ahead.

* Podcast of convocation available at
https://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=4aF9dPkKUAQ,

This address starts at about minute 44 of podcast.

Citation presented by Ian Barker begins at about minute 40