22 November 2017

U of A Convocation Address

Eminent Chancellor, President, Board representative, distinguished members of the academy, honored guests, and imminent graduates:

"Education is what survives when what has been learned has been forgotten."

Skinner published that sentence the same month that I last addressed Convocation: May 1964. I acknowledge my huge debt to this my Alma Mater, my bounteous mother. This University's Law Faculty is the second- or third-oldest in common-law Canada. It was founded by John Weir, the Vinerian Prize-winner in Oxford. He became Dean of Law after a recruitment competition among the pick of the legal scholars of North America. A master of Socratic teaching, he was the most electrifying law teacher that I have ever heard of.

One of my teachers here was Dr Alexander Smith, who got two degrees here and two from Stanford (including a very rare graduate degree) I have never encountered a better university teacher, in Oxford or anywhere. Dr. Smith created and gave each law class deep analysis unavailable elsewhere.

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But no Law graduates are here this morning. We gather to honor those of you getting degrees today. I also honor those who taught you.

Of all professions, teaching is the greatest. It does far more than protect or repair.

A scholar's discoveries enrich the world. But a scholar's teaching improves the human race. Successful societies' enduring economic and ethical assets are not factories, nor bank accounts. Its assets are its technical, commercial, and ethical traditions. 20th Century history proves that. Churchill said "The empires of the future are the empires of the mind."

So those riches and standards would erode without educated people to enforce and implement them. And if we lost those riches, in a generation or two our educated people would rediscover most of them. Therefore, the true wealth of society is its learning, and its willingness to implement it.

Where is the latest addition to those riches? In the front rows here: you, our new graduates.

Let's examine you. How did you become so accomplished? Partly by all your efforts and those of your families. And Alberta taxpayers' contributions. But mostly from the people who taught you.
The idea that society owes much to its teachers is not novel. Especially on days when diplomas are handed out. Each of you new graduates, ask yourself this. How grateful to my teachers am I? Not enough.

That sounds harsh. I accuse you of ingratitude, though I have never even met you. Why? Because you cannot be grateful enough unless you can calculate your debt. Cruel irony shortchanges all good teachers.

No outsider can really properly assess good teaching. Universities do not teach publicly: only the students attend lectures. And the needs and susceptibility of each student differ. Various students differ in who they learn more from.

Most learning is active. So your own role in learning further cloaks your teachers' contributions.

You did not learn in isolation. You and your fellow students debated, explained, elicited ethical and emotional responses, and so motivated each other. Stephen Leacock said universities should build coffee rooms before libraries or lecture halls. But who stirred your classmates to those efforts? Your teachers. Plutarch and Wilder Penfield both said that a student mind is a fire to be lit. You felt its flames, but do not recall the match.

Most important, learning erases your memory. No one given good teaching still has physical ability to recognize the size of that gift. Why?

Because an effective teacher reshapes your brain. How does each of you differ from the person that you were in Grade Twelve? No one really knows. Certainly not you. Your mind formed new connections, and now views and analyzes your universe differently. You have lost your former ways of seeing or thinking about things. Gone are many of your brain's old circuits. Your mind is now more integrated, and works faster. It is not an attic storing information, but a set of working circuits. At first you could not master your large adolescent brain. Now your brain is so adaptable and complex that it has no good analogy. It is a bit like a sophisticated high-speed self-revising computer.

Think again about that person with your name in Grade Twelve. You might recognize his or her face, but if you met your old self you would not like or recognize, your old thinking.

Believe in your heart that you owe a moral debt to your teachers, though you cannot assess, see, or feel it.

Your biggest debt may not be to the instructors you liked best, or who amused or flattered you. Nor to the professors you disliked the most. The teachers who excited you deserve thanks, but they may not have reshaped you most.

Probably you owe your biggest debt to a few instructors. Maybe they had no particular style, ego, nor fame. Maybe some were young, closer to your cautious basic learning stage.
They sent out a reading list, then walked modestly into the lecture room. They made the topic straightforward, though sometimes you struggled to keep up. Their courses ran efficiently. Quietly, bit by bit, they helped you to rewire your brain. Now you cannot really say who they were. They may never get awards, make great discoveries, publish famous papers, nor get big grants or promotions. Like the unknown soldier, they carry on steadily to the end.

Yet they re-made you. Anything you achieve in the future, you will achieve with what they made: a new you.

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Now you have an education and a degree, both from a great university of the highest standards. Always reflect: tucked away in this University are a few teachers who transformed you.

Honor your Alma Mater!

Thank you.