Speech by Firoz Rasul
At University of Alberta Convocation held on
June 8th, 2017

Chancellor Doug Stollery, President David Turpin, Chairman and members of the Board, families, friends and graduands or shall I say fellow engineers.

The honour being conferred upon me today is very meaningful for several reasons – because of the long and special relationship between the University of Alberta and my university, the Aga Khan University; the honour I am receiving from the Faculty of Engineering, even though I only used my engineering education to do other things; and the fact that my wife is receiving a similar honour tomorrow. I am humbled and grateful for the recognition.

In deciding what to speak about and what advice I could give, I reflected on my own experiences as an engineer, an entrepreneur, a volunteer and now a university president. I believe an aphorism or saying I came across captures the essence of what I want to share. The words have been attributed to several people but probably came from Ralph Waldo Emerson. They are:

**THOSE WHO KNOW HOW WILL ALWAYS WORK FOR THOSE WHO KNOW WHY.**

As many of you understand, engineering is a “how” profession – how to conceptualize, how to design, how to make, how to build or construct, how to operate, how to maintain, etc. I am sure all of you will be successful in your
respective fields. After all you are graduates of the University of Alberta, one of the top engineering schools in Canada. But if you want to rise above the crowd, you will have to acquire other ways of thinking.

Working in the bowels of a manufacturing organization, as an industrial engineer making high quality widgets, I kept asking myself, who decided what widgets we should make, and why these widgets and not others? Engineers are taught to analyze problems – to breakdown the problem into its component parts and figure out what is wrong before developing a solution. But the question I asked requires synthesis – standing back and considering the problem in a wider context. So do you understand your context?

The world today and ahead of you is undergoing accelerating change, in terms of technology, social norms, communications, rising nationalism, dynamic geopolitics, economic inequality, mass migration, synthetic biology, medical advancements, artificial intelligence, and massive online education, to name a few. The list is endless.

The context also includes questions like: Why was Donald Trump elected as President of the US? Why is the political and economic centre of gravity of the world moving to the Indian Ocean? Why are many countries of the world running out of fresh or drinkable water? Why is culture important for development of society? Why is everyone excited and at the same time worried about the fact that 60% of Africa’s population is under 25 and the number will double by 2050? Why is regenerative medicine from stem cells going to revolutionize healthcare and why is it also scary? Why does the largest hoteling company, AirBnB, own no rooms and
only has 2500 employees and why does the world’s largest taxi company, Uber own no cars and employ no drivers, yet is valued at $70 billion. These innovations will have an immediate and mindboggling impact.

What are the implications of these changes? Why are they occurring? Who or what is driving them? Why are we not thinking about all the lost jobs? What will be the effect on you, your families and your communities?

I believe if you don’t learn to question, think about and understand this larger context, you will be swimming in an ever-decreasing pool of opportunity.

But where do you get your information about the context? As I advise you to open up your minds to view the world around you from a different lens and to learn from it, I am concerned about the authenticity of what we hear, watch and learn. And here I am not talking about “fake news”. Let’s look from where we get our information. The media industry is undergoing revolutionary change. Everyday fewer and fewer people consume their news from newspapers; the difference between information, opinion and entertainment is fast disappearing; and short video is rapidly displacing the thoughtfully written word as a way of communicating. Yet, as we are exposed to more sources, more media and more formats, we confront more challenges.

His Highness the Aga Khan, the Founder and Chancellor of the Aga Khan University said in 2016 in Toronto:

“Media proliferation is…a challenge: what it often means is media fragmentation. Many now live in their own media bubbles, resisting diverse views…We think sometimes that
the new technologies can save us. If we can connect faster, at lower cost, across greater distances, with more people, just think what could happen! We would all learn more…. But I am not sure that things are working out that way. The explosion of available information often means less focus on relevant information, and even a surfeit of misinformation…”

The New York Times wrote last week:

“The 140-character Twitter network favoured by President Trump... is used heavily by people in media....

That’s an issue because Twitter is making the news dumber... It exacerbates groupthink. It prizes pundit-ready quips over substantive debate, and it tends to elevate the silly over the serious. But the biggest problem with Twitter’s place in the news is its role in the production and dissemination of propaganda and misinformation.”

Graduates, all of this means we have a shrinking attention span; and we only listen to those whose opinions match ours, who belong to the same groups, and with whom we agree. This tribalism is comfortable but very dangerous because we will develop a narrow understanding of the world, if we miss out on other perspectives, opinions and positions.

So my advice to you is to widen the aperture of your lens, expand and diversify your sources of information, listen to and read opinions you disagree with, but the best of all is visit other parts of the world to see for yourself what is going on. Preferably go and work or volunteer for a while and not just visit as a tourist.

And remember to keep asking why?

Thank you for the honour