Douglas Goss, Q.C., AOE
Convocation Address
University of Alberta
June 14th, 2017
Eminent Chancellor Stollery, President Turpin, Board Chair Phair, Graduating Class of 2017, friends and family -

First let me say what an honour it is to stand before you today to accept this recognition from my beloved University of Alberta. I have had the honour of participating in many Convocation ceremonies, and have watched some incredible people receive Honourary Doctorates. Today, standing here myself, it is truly special and humbling. I share this special honour with my family, all of whom are here today - my wife, Joanne, and my three children, Amanda and her fiancé Scott, and my other daughter, Jules, and my son, Michael. It's especially great to have my Mom, Maxine, here, and my mother-in-law, Coby. I know my Dad, Ray, is looking down from above, with a big smile on his face.

I am also very proud to have served as the volunteer Board Chair for this University for over three and half years, serving with incredible volunteer Board Members, both internal and external. Many of them are here today, and I want to thank each and every one of them for their tremendous contribution to this University. The University of Alberta is so vitally important to this Province, and this Community, and I am proud to have played some part, with all of you, in keeping this University strong and vital for the public good.

Before I begin, I am always reminded of my late friend and mentor, Ray Nelson, who would teasingly, before I would begin a speech, ask whether my speech would be long, or would it just seem long. My sincere hope is that this speech will be neither.

In addressing you today I want to talk about two things - truth and purpose.
I don't know how many times I have spoken the University Grace, which asks us to obey the precept of this, our University, which is simply "... let us pursue more steadfastly whatsoever things are true". "Quaecumque vera". I have always been struck not only by the simplicity, but by the power of those words. They were written so many years ago but they have never been more relevant.

So why is the truth important? At its core, "the truth" is about reality. It defines not only who we are, but as importantly, where we are, and where we need to go. The truth guides us. Ignoring the truth can take us in the wrong direction. We don't have to look very far in the world today to see "the truth" under assault from some who would tell you that the truth is not important. Others distort the truth. They could not be more misguided.

So what is our collective reality? Where are we going as a species?

In his book "Sapiens", Yuval Noah Harari recounts the 70,000 year history of homo sapiens which, as he pointed out, started as an insignificant animal minding its own business in a corner of Africa, and has evolved into what is now a race - the human race - and we have truly transformed this planet, sometimes for the better, and sometimes not.

Our population has exploded. 150 years ago, in 1867, the population of Canada was approximately 3 million people, and approximately a billion of us occupied this planet. 100 years later, in 1967, there were approximately 20 million Canadians and 3 billion people on planet earth. Just 50 years later, now in the year 2017, Canada's population has grown to approximately 35 million, but more importantly, the world's population has more than doubled with 7.4 billion people occupying our planet.
This massive population explosion has been accompanied by tremendous progress, both technical and otherwise. Yet many of our species continue to suffer disease, famine, and unspeakable violence on a daily basis. This has led me to ask: Have we really progressed that far as a species?

Sustenance and security are fundamental needs, yet they continue to elude so many. What is worse, we seem to have no clear path to answers, and there are many forces pushing us in opposing directions. Indeed, Harari says in his book, "although we have advanced from canoes to galleys to steamships to space shuttles, it is still not clear where we, as a species, are going". The last line of his book really grabbed me, when Harari asks "is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible "Gods" who do not know what they want". Recently Pope Francis warned the twenty seven EU Leaders that their union was in trouble when he said "When a body loses its sense of direction and is no longer able to look ahead, it experiences a regression and, in the long run, risks dying.".

So I ask you, do they have a point? Have we lost our sense of direction? We live in a world where information from around the globe is immediately available. Indeed, from an information standpoint we have never been more connected. Most of us receive regular notifications on our smart phones from far and wide, regarding news, world events, science, sporting events, or whatever, as that news is breaking. We have come to expect immediacy. We have instant, global contact with family, friends, and various interest groups on social media. We have 24 / 7 access to movies, Netflix, YouTube, talk shows, and the like. We have come to expect that everything will be available to us when we want it. But surely our purpose must be more than simply keeping ourselves entertained.
Is there a common purpose that we all can, and should, collectively pursue? I believe there is. Surely our common purpose must simply be to protect and nurture this planet and all who live here. As human beings, this should be what defines us. It is what separates us from all other species on this planet - our ability to care for others. What's more, when we do care for others we experience our greatest joy.

His Holiness the Dali Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, who received an Honourary Doctorate from this University in 2000, recently wrote a book called "The Book of Joy". In the book they reflect on the foundations for long-lasting happiness and joy in life.

The first, and most important, is humility - knowing that not any one of us is more important than the other. The second is gratitude - being grateful for what we have. The third is compassion - the ability to care and have empathy for others. The last is generosity - the ability to give to others.

These foundations of joy and happiness are very much inter-related. Humility and gratitude enable compassion and generosity - and vice versa. We can only really experience gratitude with humility. Generosity is the ultimate expression of compassion.

There are some shining examples of these principles at work in our world today. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation works under the simple proposition that every life has equal value. They advance upwards of $4 billion annually in pursuit of the notion that all people, no matter where they are born, are entitled to lead healthy and productive lives. Warren Buffett's investment in the Foundation is described by him as his single greatest investment. My own experience tells me that the true joy is in the giving.
It's comforting to me that the very actions that give us the greatest joy are precisely the drivers necessary to achieve a higher human purpose.

Clearly, not all of us have the resources of Bill and Melinda Gates or Warren Buffett to help others in need, but what we do have is the ability to live by these principles and positively affect the lives we touch every day. It can be as simple as a smile, a helping hand, or making someone feel welcome in a new community. The impact of gestures like these can be enormous. For myself, I have tried to follow the principle of thinking globally, but acting locally. In other words, keeping the interests of the entire planet first and foremost by doing what I can to improve the lives of those around me each and every day.

It's hard to mention Bill Gates or Warren Buffett without thinking of wealth or prosperity. Pursuing prosperity as a nation, a province, a business, or just as individuals, is very important. It is prosperity that gives us resources to do the right thing - be it environmental protection, health care, support of education initiatives and institutions such as this great University, or looking after our most needy and vulnerable. We are so privileged to live in this wealthy nation. You are privileged to have the education and abilities that brought you to this day. We all have great expectations for your future - because it is also our future. But remember… to whom much is given, much is asked. Prosperity is important, but it is what we do with our prosperity that defines us.

As human beings we have a responsibility to each other, to all of humanity. As His Highness the Aga Khan remarked when he received an Honourary Doctorate from this University in 2009, "In today's community of nations a country's standing is no longer recognized simply by what it can achieve for itself but as much by what it can do for others".
So - Class of 2017 - you have significant challenges ahead, but with these challenges come tremendous opportunities to make a difference by following those basic human attributes that are in all of us - humility, gratefulness, compassion, and generosity. We are poised - you are poised - to do just that. The greatest challenge for your generation will be to tear down the walls that divide us as human beings once and for all, and in the process protect and improve the life experience of all who inhabit this beautiful planet.

I will leave you with one final thought. **We are all we have.** Scientists think they have found another solar system similar to our own and, fortunately, it's in our galaxy, and it's only 139 light years away. If we left tomorrow, using the fastest form of transportation known to man, it would take us 900,000 years to reach that solar system. So, folks, it's just us. We are all in this together, and to be successful, together we must be.

Congratulations Class of 2017. I am confident that we are in good hands.

Thank you again for this honour. I am deeply humbled.