

**Dr. Lloyd Axworthy
President & Vice-Chancellor
The University of Winnipeg
Address to the 2007 Graduating Class
Spring Convocation, June 3, 2007**

Welcome everyone to today's convocation. This is a time for celebrating our students, and for celebrating and thanking those who support, inspire, and serve as examples for them as they venture along their respective paths. This is also a particularly special day for us because it is an occasion to mark our 40th anniversary - on September 15, 1967 United College received its Charter to become The University of Winnipeg. This means that this is an occasion for all of us, both individually and as an institution, to celebrate accomplishments and to set our sights on the future.

Today's ceremony can help us all engage in this reflection. Our traditional dress and band, the ritual of walking across the stage to receive your degree, the practice of hearing from various people from the University community and from society at large – all of these actions help set this day apart from the mundane and create a space out of which landmarks and guideposts are set in our lives. Through this day, we have the opportunity to do what English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge admired his friend Williams Wordsworth for accomplishing - “excit[ing] a feeling analogous to the supernatural, by awakening the mind's attention from the lethargy of custom, and directing it to the loveliness and the wonders of the world before us.”

In creating this opportunity for awakening, I hope that family, friends, distinguished guests, and especially graduates will pause to ask not what the world holds for you as the robes come off and you return to daily life, but instead what you can bring to it.

In asking this question, our celebrated students will have to consider how to take what has been learned through their time at The University of Winnipeg and use it as responsibly as possible in the years to come. In so doing, I hope that you will be inspired by people such as our honorary degree recipients, who have so clearly brought so much to all of us.

Joyce Milgaard has demonstrated the power of a mother's love, never showing the slightest break in her faith and commitment to her son as she devoted over four decades to the pursuit of justice for the wrongfully convicted; Steven Schipper's directorship of the Manitoba Theatre Centre is reminding all Manitobans of the important role that theatre plays in helping us understand the human condition; James Eldridge's impressive career in the civil service demonstrates a dedication to bringing forth skills and vision in the interest of the public good; and Randall Moffat's quiet philanthropic generosity enriches the lives of disadvantaged children and families throughout Winnipeg and Manitoba.

The message that we can all recall as we recognise these remarkable people is that there are as many ways of giving to the world as there are people to give. As a university, it is

our job to help students develop the vision, passion, and skills with which to offer their best to the world. Today we recognise the family, friends, donors, governments and tax payers who have brought so much by supporting us in doing our job. We recognise university staff – those who keep this institution operating smoothly so that our students can be safe and comfortable as they study. We recognise those distinguished faculty who have not only been extraordinary teachers, but also welcome role models and mentors to their students through their dedication to governance and community. All of these people have brought to the world the resources – both material and immaterial – necessary to allow another generation of bright young people to flourish intellectually and personally.

Today is also a day for us at The University of Winnipeg to thank our students, who are so often blessed with an idealism that can serve as a spark for change that becomes infectious.

At this University over the past few years, we have been steadily working towards fostering an increased sense of global citizenship and environmental responsibility among our university community. Last fall, we passed a set of environmental sustainability policies that are unparalleled in scope and depth anywhere else in Canada. It was a group of students that first came to the administration to propose that we take on this type of project. The policies that were passed were developed through the collaboration of an incredibly dedicated group of students, faculty, and staff, who volunteered countless hours to a project in which they all believe. This year, this group has developed implementation plans for ambitious environmental goals and has begun work on the next suit of policies, which will address social sustainability.

The idealism of our students helped set a strong vision for the increasingly sustainable path ahead, a path that includes the construction of a new campus and science complex based on sustainability principles and the Richardson College for the Environment, made possible through the largest private gift in The University of Winnipeg's history. This college will significantly enhance science education at the University, particularly in the areas of Forest Ecology, Urban Ecology, The Global North, Water Resources, and Environment & Health.

The College will also be home to the Institute for Environmental Finance, a place for students and academics to develop innovative ways of transitioning to a sustainable economy. This institute will be a hub for applied research in the study and development of financial instruments and market-based mechanisms that help facilitate environmental conservation and sustainable development in the public interest.

We also have our Global College, which held a conference on Human Rights and Social Justice in February that had significant numbers of student volunteers and participants; the WiiChiiWakanak Learning Commons, where students from our faculty of education have been mentoring students from the neighbourhood; and our community ambassadors program, through which students in the justice program are providing security on our campus and in the surrounding community. The commitment to local and global citizenship that these students demonstrate is a true inspiration that compels those of us

who have not been students for many years to continue to be guided by a strong and positive vision for the future, and for this we as an institution are truly grateful.

This same inspiration can be found in a number of our graduates - Daniel Voth, this year's gold medallist in Honours Politics, whose professors marvel at his knowledge of and passion for issues facing Aboriginal peoples; Dawn Tarnowski, a single mother who has faced many challenges along her path to an integrated BA/B.Ed. degree; Michael Mayan and David Mabior Atem, the two first individuals from the Lost Boys and Girls of Sudan to graduate with degrees in International Development Studies; Rodrigo Beilfuss from Brazil a talented actor with a bright future ahead of him. There is also Caitlin Forsey, a sociologist with a promising research future, and Lee Hrenchuk, who studied both Biology and Film and is conducting cutting-edge research on slimy sculpins and pollution. And of course, there are our student athletes who performed well on the courts and playing fields – our Men's Volleyball team winning championship gold.

Most impressive of all, though, is that fact that these examples represent only a fraction of what students have brought to their communities and to the academic world. Each of you has a story to tell about what you have contributed, and for this reason I am confident that as you move beyond The University of Winnipeg and along your respective paths, you will have the courage to nurture a vision for a more just and sustainable world and to turn it into reality in the years to come.

As you venture along these paths, I would like to offer some remarks about the importance of your degrees in education, science, the arts, and theology. I would like to remind this new generation of teachers that the importance of educators cannot be overestimated – it will be up to you to instil in future generations the quality of inquisitiveness, a passion for learning and independent thinking, and a desire to live justly and sustainably. You might also consider being the young sparks of vision to your fellow teachers and your principals, encouraging them to turn their schools into models of environmental and social responsibility in all of their operations.

I am reminded of a meeting hosted last week by The University of Winnipeg and attended by 36 university presidents from across Canada to discuss how universities can better serve Aboriginal students. Grand Chief Phil Fontaine said something that this institution has taken to heart – the way out of poverty and the way forward is through education. This is why we launched our Innovative Learning Centre in the fall, which provides opportunities for inner-city and Aboriginal students to relate indigenous values to traditional scientific and environmental issues, and connects local school children to the University from a young age. Our new science complex will also house a “Model School” that will support the efforts of the ILC while the Opportunity Fund, launched over the winter, will help students earn financial credit for University tuition through participation in educational programming, helping more students think of university as an option.

The scientists in our midst also have an important responsibility ahead of them – as you engage in research and teaching, you will not only have the responsibility of developing

innovative solutions to pressing issues in environment, health, and energy, to name only a few, but you will also be faced with the challenge of learning how to communicate your science to the public and how to face the ethical implications of your discoveries. Here, you might be inspired by your fellow graduate, Nick Neufeld, whose student designed major combining physics and neuroscience has led him through an already impressive research history with the functional neuroimaging lab at NRC and whose interest in science and public awareness surely inspired him to host a very successful radio show on CKUW.

Of course, those of you who have studied Theology and the Arts also have much to contribute. Tom Kelly at the University of New Hampshire has pointed that that in Book III of *The Republic*, Plato reasons that ‘those properly educated in the arts will quickly perceive and deplore the absence or perversion of beauty in art or nature.’ The implication here is that a proper education in the arts allows one to quickly perceive and deplore ecological irresponsibility and social injustice. Plato also argued that the person properly educated in the arts would not just delight in beauty, but would nourish beauty. To nourish is to take action – to practice engaged citizenship.¹

As this University celebrates its 40th year, we as an institution can also reflect on what we offer to our young talent and be proud and grateful for a very exciting year. This year, in addition to the exciting donation from the Richardson Family and Foundation, we received a very generous gift from CanWest Global to renovate and extend our theatre building, providing theatre and film space that will finally do justice to the talent that it produces.

As I personally reflect on these developments and on the fact that they will further our institution’s ability to help students explore new ideas and think freely, I am reminded of a trip I took last month to meet Anatoli Mikaihlov. Anatoli is the rector (president) of a highly unusual, if not unique, institution of higher learning - a university in exile.

The European Humanities University (EHU) was established in the ancient city of Minsk in Belarus to be a beacon of learning and study in the post soviet era. It was founded on the belief that the restoration of democracy depended on the free expression of ideas - teaching a new generation of young people the wisdom of the humanities tradition. It quickly fulfilled its mission, becoming a hub of open debate and discourse, attracting attention throughout the entire region of former communist satellite regimes for its programs in philosophy, law, languages and political studies.

It was too successful. Its espousal of liberal causes and the political activism of its students attracted the unwanted attention of Alexander Lukashenko, the president of Belarus. One morning three years ago, students and faculty arrived at school to find the doors locked, the library books confiscated, and the rector fleeing to the neighbouring state of Lithuania on threat of imprisonment. Students and faculty alike protested and grieved but to no avail - the university was silenced by government orders.

¹ Tom Kelly, *Building a Sustainable Learning Community at the University of New Hampshire*, http://www.vink.helsinki.fi/files/Theoria_building.html, accessed January 30th, 2007, p.11.

This silencing would not last. Students and faculty would not let the distinctive quality of EHU learning be snuffed out by government fiat. They packed up and moved the university 176 kilometres north to Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania. Today, EHU succeeds in offering a full curriculum to 380 students on a makeshift campus and uses distance learning to educate a further five hundred students who remain in Belarus.

The students and faculty I met in Vilnius brought home to me a very important insight: amongst the celebrations of graduates and their families and the exhortations of keynote speakers on how the new credentials being handed out in the sheepskin folder are the prerequisite to getting a better job, it might be worth taking a moment to remember that the small cluster of students and teachers in their bare bones quarters in Vilnius represent the true spirit of higher education. For them it is the right to think freely, to explore new ideas without fear of repression, to find the venues they need to be able to give to the world what they have to offer.

They are fighting that battle for all of us as their university continues to wedge itself and its way of life into a society that does not want it but that surely needs it.

There is a parallel here with the Crow tribe of the land that is now called Montana. In his recent book *Radical Hope*, Jonathan Lear explains how the Crow's chief saw the sweeping changes affecting his people because of the arrival of the Europeans. The chief's response was to reject despair and instead offer his people a traditional way forward by wedging himself into the white man's world, negotiating land deals that would ensure the Crow tribe could maintain a serious presence within the irrevocably shifted landscape. This presence meant not only hope for the Crow, but also for all of us searching for rays of light and hope through our traditions.

It is with this that I can think of no better time to remind all of us of our University's motto: *Lux et Veritas Floreant* – let light and truth flourish. As we celebrate all of our students and their families and friends, our distinguished faculty and guests, and our highly valued staff, I hope that we will all move forward with the goal of working to spread light and truth in all that we undertake. Today, let us shine light on the people we have the honour of celebrating so that we may be inspired to redouble our efforts at shining light on a world in need.