

Valedictory Address
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81st University of Winnipeg Convocation

Mr. Chancellor, Mr. President, distinguished guests, fellow graduates, ladies and gentlemen, Canadian communications theorist Marshall McLuhan once said “There are no passengers on spaceship earth. We are all crew.” As we take the time today to celebrate the fact that we students have just completed our university degrees, McLuhan’s words can help us answer the question that many of us are probably getting tired of hearing: What next? I hope that all of my fellow graduates will agree with me when I say that the only thing for us to do next is to try to be the best crew members we can be.

Now, if our time at the University of Winnipeg has taught us one thing, it is that being good crew members will not be an easy task. We know that our task will be difficult because here, we have studied the many challenges we, as members of local and global communities, all face. We have learned about the threat of ecological collapse, about the persistence of poverty not only in far away countries but also in our own backyards, and about the terrible consequences of armed conflicts past and present. We have grappled with the existence of social injustice and inequality across the globe. We have come to see these problems within their larger historical contexts. We have examined the ways in which they are not only reflected in, but also criticised or supported by, different authors and thinkers in literature, in philosophy, and in theology. We have learned how to question and how to re-think the social, economic, and ecological systems and relationships at the base of these problems. In short, we have come to understand that the world is a complicated place and that the problems that we and our fellow crew members face are intricately and systematically interconnected.

Still, there is a sense in which our academics have prompted us to dedicate more time to constructing the ideal resolution to these problems in our minds, than to determining how our own actions and choices might help or hinder their resolution in the real world. Rushed for time, we sometimes found ourselves driving to school to learn about the troubles of climate change. We found ourselves eating food that travelled long distances and was produced by people we will never meet as we learned about the many benefits of local food systems. We locked ourselves inside to finish essays about racism instead of going outside, talking to our neighbours, and confronting our own prejudices head on. It will be our task in the coming years to bridge this gap between our thoughts and our actions.

We have to be aware, though, that building this bridge will require us to think beyond ourselves. Our university education puts us in an ironic position: it provides us with the kind of economic and social power that seems to make us less susceptible to the same problems we have spent the past few years trying to solve in our minds. The better we become at thinking and talking about the challenges that we as members of our communities face together, the less our immediate well-being seems to depend on our solving them.

We therefore have to ask ourselves some important questions: Will we choose to exercise our status as crew members on planet Earth unconsciously, pretending that we have no choice in, and no responsibility for, the challenges that all members of our global community face? Will we use the economic and social power that our education has provided us only for our personal benefit, likely at the expense of other people and ecosystems? OR will we exercise the power each and every one of us has to vote with our energy, and with our time, consciously? Will we accept the challenge of deliberately grappling with the implications of our life choices every day? Will we commit to confronting our prejudices and to transforming our positions of power

from positions of domination into positions from which we can facilitate dialogues *within* and *amongst* society at large in an attempt to understand the nature of the social, economic, and ecological relationships every one of our daily choices brings us into?

In the years that come, the answers we have to these questions will be reflected in the direction our planet and its inhabitants move in. This does not mean that we will all agree on what direction to take. Rather, the direction we move in will reflect the synthesis of the will of each and every crew member on planet earth. Naturally, we will encounter many disagreements along the way, but through them we will have the opportunity to deepen and widen the discourse around our shared challenges. Through these disagreements we will also have the opportunity to rethink our values and our perceptions of each other and to begin to uncover the common ground upon which we all stand.

Before I leave you, I would like us to take a moment to recognise the parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, friends, partners, spouses, mentors, role models, and professors who inspired, supported, and encouraged us over the past few years. Had these people not directed some combination of their energy, time, and (if we were especially fortunate) money towards the success of our education, we would not be celebrating together here today. In this sense, we have to thank them for seeing in us worthwhile recipients of their labours. It is as evidence of the fruit of all of these people's labours that we leave here today with our degrees in hand. We cannot forget, though, that our degrees by themselves are mute. When supplemented by our actions, however, they speak volumes about the kind of people we shall become as we venture further along our respective paths, and about the kind of world we will create together in the process. It is in this spirit, and in recognition of the many people that have

supported us along the paths that got us here today, that I wish you all success – success in improving yourselves along with, and not at the expense of, the world which we all share.