UBC Graduation Address, 29 May 2019

W.H. New

Mr. Chancellor , Mr. President, Colleagues, friends, family, ladies and gentlemen, members of the graduating class:

Thank you for this extraordinary honour.

I think I've been a UBC student ever since I started here some 63 years ago. That's 1956: the place has changed since then. Apparently I have, too—mirrors and memories tell me so. But as you know, mirrors and memories are not neutral; they engineer what we see and how we see it—which this morning prompts me to ask why remembering a changing university matters.

To explain, I'm going to call up a few characteristic UBC sights from my time: a coffee mug, a black umbrella, a squash racquet, and a briefcase of books. I won't say why—not yet. But over the next few minutes I'll try to make clear why they're important to me, and what they might have to do with you.

When I first *saw* the campus—on one of those Open House days when children were asked in—I simply viewed the university as a place of wonder. No preconceptions—no-one in my family had any university experience— but after that first visit I knew that I wanted to attend: it looked like an adventure— I found mystery in old stone buildings, imagination at play in earthquake labs, and (not long after) magic… when I sampled the classic campus cinnamon bun.

Push the clock ahead a few years: I enrolled; I spent five summers on geological surveys; I got two degrees; then went away and came back again, to teach, wrangle mysteries, ask questions, stir imaginations. My interests turned from the magnitude of earthquakes to the contours of geography to the changing forms of language and literature; space and time have altered even more. I once took courses in anonymous army huts; now I see the names of my teachers on road signs: Earle Birney, Peter Larkin: on this campus, their ideas and enthusiasms are where we now walk.

I mean this observation both empirically and emblematically. Think for a moment about places here that *you* say you'll never forget; maybe you know of several. For me, memorable places include the squash court, where I played every week when I was able (I've long since been mastering the art of the stationary bike); the Library (which became my lab); the classroom, where my students inspired me (they've continued to do so as they've taken up their own careers around the world); and the path along the tip of Point Grey, the promontory that the Musqueam call *Ulksen*, 'the nose': a place where one can walk, with or without an umbrella in the rain, look out to sea, appreciate the fluidity of boundary lines, and reflect on the ecological importance of the water cycle to our collective survival. The university is a place

with its own geography; it's also a set of mind: a space for posing questions and for seeking ways to answer them.

My questions, from early on, had to do with Canada: *where was my place?* I asked. At a time when Canadian writing was not widely known, *Who spoke for me?* Preliminary answers came along in 1958, when UBC designed the first year-long course in Canadian writing to be offered anywhere in the country. Many applauded this challenge to existing conventions of teaching English; others called it a waste of time. I was fascinated: by the subject and also by these contrasting cultural attitudes, which surfaced again a year later at UBC when President Norman MacKenzie and others founded the critical journal *Canadian Literature* here and convinced the prolific writer George Woodcock to edit it; like the literature itself, the journal thrived.

I see the university as a place for such forward thinking: a place to gather knowledge, learn how to gather knowledge, share learning, and push at the limits of what we know. For me, learning *about* Canadian literature also challenged me to rethink what I was looking for. If I was asking the world's readers to hear Canadians' perspectives on the world, then how was I listening to their voices? And did the existence of 'diversity' at home reaffirm my assumptions or challenge them—or both?

How *can* we cross cultural boundaries, I asked. What can we each build on what we find out? What cultural knowledge do we all need to bring to the work we do?

Over the years my students answered, their coffee cups in hand. One class even made a cup for me, inscribing it with their favourite quotations from the books we'd been studying. And they asked *their* questions, Do we express our sense of the world through lenses and language shaped by class or race or gender, or not; do we assume that absolute either/or choices govern all decisions about ethics, aesthetics, or the body politic, or do we think in some other way? Do we think of ourselves as a uniform people, or as a random collection of unfettered individuals, or as part of a social agreement in which the rights and responsibilities of individuals are somehow balanced with those of community? If a community, which community? Is a university itself a community, and what is its connection with the rest of the world?

Lately I've been reading four books by contemporary B.C. writers: Eden Robinson's *Trickster Drift*, Esi Edugyan's *Washington Black,* Madeleine Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*, and Patrick Lane's *Deep River Night.* One book tells of a teenager who battles drugs, alcohol, and his complicated inheritance of Haisla tales as he walks the boundary lines between city and reserve; one tells of a talented boy who survives slavery only to find that survival is another form of persecution; a third book follows a family across several generations as they cope with emigration and the Cultural Revolution in China; and the fourth is set in a gritty sawmill town on the North Thompson River.

These books tell us of the society we live in now; they warn, they engage, they ask us to recognize who we are and also to think about how we change and can change. It's the world that you're already helping to re-imagine, remodel, and repair. Which brings me back to those four UBC images I mentioned earlier and why they matter. The coffee cup, which tells me of friendships; the racquet, which stands in for challenges; the umbrella, which cautions me to respect the environment; the bag of books, which says to keep learning.

As you remember your own years here, be encouraged by what the Canadian writer Robert Kroetsch writes, in 'I Try to Steal My Identity'

> We like telling stories to the young, but the young
> don't like to listen. It is their refusing to hear
> that gives new syllables to their tongues.
>
> (*Too Bad.* Edmonton: UAlbertaP, 2010: 78)

Today I wish you wonder, because it asks questions; laughter, because it gives you perspective; empathy, because it eases connection; optimism, because it greets the future. And I wish you new syllables. Congratulations to you all, and thank you.