

University of British Columbia
23 May 2019

I am greatly honored to join the class of 2019, and I want to congratulate you most warmly on the achievements that have led to the award of your degrees. But I must warn you that the purpose of having speakers at commencement is to prolong the ceremonies and make you even more impatient to receive this long-anticipated reward.

Once upon a time, a crusty old Vermonter, living on an island in the middle of the Connecticut River, was unexpectedly found to be living not in Vermont but on the New Hampshire side of the border between those states. The surveyors went somewhat fearfully to tell him the news. To their relief, his reaction was entirely positive. *“Well, thank the good Lord,”* he said, *“I didn’t think I could tolerate another of those goddamned Vermont winters.”*

You, too, are to be placed across a border. Another Vancouver winter lies behind you, and you will become one of *them*, of the alumni reminiscing about their student days. Degrees hang on like burrs, and UBC’s mark will remain on you forever. You will accumulate many reminders of this as you receive incessant communications of immense good will from the university which, you will find, is like the church that welcomes all denominations, preferably five and tens and twenties with zeroes attached.

You will also find, unless you are extremely careful, that UBC will, perhaps as early as tomorrow, fall into a lamentable state of decline. It is a common experience of graduates to feel that their college is not exactly what it was in their day, and that not to be the same, or the place of their memory, is to be less than before. I urge you to avoid this trap and to remember that it is in the nature of living institutions not to ossify, but to change and adapt. Your question should be whether your university has remained faithful to its ethos and in doing so, has maintained the defining goals and spirit for which you care, even while assimilating those to sometimes new ways. Your commitment to its fundamental ideals as also to the studies of the liberal arts should make you advocates for the best in higher education in a society that badly needs to hear and support their value.

My own belief is that a liberal education is more important than ever in a complicated world marked by the rapid advances of science and technology, by the

tsunamis of social upheaval that are breaking against every shore, by the immediate global impact of events that may take place far away and the unending endemic conflict within and between areas and groups defining themselves by religion, nationality, and ethnicity. These features and more require a search for cultural understanding, for the powers of intellect and insight and of the capacity to deal with ambiguity and complexity in a world that demands difficult and often imperfect choices to be thoughtfully addressed and executed. Its citizens need to be able to think broadly and beyond the boundaries of particular specializations about difficult issues, for example those involved in the uses of the science and technology that are moving forward so rapidly or those that have to do with the trade-offs presented by major policy initiatives (for example, related to economic growth and climate change) that that may actually appear to come into conflict with one another.

The liberal arts are not a panacea. Their power is great, but it should not be misinterpreted or exaggerated. They cannot guarantee the acquisition of virtue. They cannot be popped like pills to attain happiness or wisdom. They are demanding of the mind and imagination, and they complicate life, as does the effort of thought. But they make life richer, and far from representing the opposite of a real world, they embody a genuinely real world of thought and expression, of knowledge and achievement, of an intellectual and scientific and artistic culture that possesses a startling and enduring reality. The sustenance of that culture is an inestimable good, a high vocation that rests on all of us.

It is, I believe, my duty to help send you off to the world with a few enduring and inspirational thoughts. Here they are, in a major teaching from the well-known philosopher Pete Seeger:

“Do you know,” he asked, “the difference between education and experience? Education is when you read the fine print. Experience is what happens when you don’t.”

So remember this, as you plunge into a life inevitably brimming with small print. And remember, too, your citizenship in this community of learning, a community that stretches well beyond its confines in your lives and service to its goals.

Warmest congratulations again to every one of you, and the very best of luck!