

2018 convocation

Thank you to the Chancellor, President and Vice Chancellor, other distinguished guests on stage, Faculty, students, parents and friends. Let me express my deep appreciation to the original peoples of this land to have welcomed us all to their unceded territories.

Congratulations to each and every one of you graduating today and to your families and friends who are proud of you. I accept this honour with a great deal of emotion and gratitude and want to thank not only UBC but also Canada.

I arrived in Canada as an international student 58 years ago after a brief period in the US where I experienced a traumatic incident because of my colour. I am eternally grateful to the then president of that university in Texas who advised me to give Canada a chance, instead of packing my bags and returning to India which was my home at that time. She had a PhD from a Canadian University and convinced me that I would find like minded people in Canada who are progressive and who truly believe in equality and human rights .So today I thank her as well, a woman who had the wisdom to counsel a young 20 year old in tears, to move to Canada.

It is a Canada that embraced me and gave me opportunities to finish University, work as a public servant both at the Provincial and Federal levels, take on leading roles in the nongovernmental sector and contribute as a volunteer locally, nationally and globally. Canada gave me opportunities to build on the already existing good will in our communities in different parts of this great country. It offered me room to grow and fit in and offer my talents to bring people and resources together to work for an even better Canada where diversity is respected and celebrated. Where else would a young foreign student with average interest in music and reading become so passionately involved in listening to Western classical music and opera and later on get doors opened to serve as a Trustee of one of the largest public libraries in Canada! Cultural minorities and people in the margins of society are guaranteed rights in our Human Rights Codes, and in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, unlike the early 1960's USA I left behind.

Canada gave me opportunities to represent her overseas at various UN conferences, Peace and Social Development Forums organized by the women's community and my own profession of Social Work. I was able to share with the world the nature of Canadian Multiculturalism with pride and confidence. My colleagues and I, at the provincial government level were able to develop racism free structures in our bureaucracies and support community based anti racism programmes. I shall

remain grateful to the Government of Canada for giving me the job as a Commissioner representing Canada to determine eligibility of refugee claimants and welcoming them from many parts of the world to this country. One can count on Canada to provide opportunities for such experiences whether you were born here or chose Canada as your home as I did.

Even though we in Canada have reasons to feel proud of our Human Rights legislations, the Charter and various UN treaties we have adopted , we still have a lot of work to do to live up to the expectations of the UN Declaration of Human Rights , which a Canadian helped to write, as we are proud to note. As yet we are a long way from the UN Declaration of the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples recommended to us by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

While Canada does provide opportunities and the environment, in which we have the potential to achieve the said goals, we need to remain committed to furthering the goals as stated in those declarations. The idea of Canada can only sustain itself through a symbiosis between people and purpose, through resonance and resolve of its pluralistic fabric that continue to evolve through its respect for the rights of the indigenous peoples and the rest of us settlers from around the world . It is a challenge for this graduating class, together with our families,

neighbours and friends. We must continue to work together for equality, peace and justice in Canada and around the world.

As human beings, we need to experience a sense of belonging which I have felt in this country and among my colleagues and friends working together to eliminate poverty, racism, sexism, violence against women and children and all other prejudices and ill conceived notions of gender , about people with varying abilities and about the aging populations in our communities. We are interdependent locally and globally. Let us prove to the world that Kipling was mistaken when he expressed the sentiments that “East is East and West is West and never the Twain shall meet”. We can and we have brought the world closer and smaller in Canada by bringing diverse people and a diversity of ideas together.

Let me emphasize. Seeking to be part of change –social change - means one must become that change. Social activism is not what others do. It gives you meaning in life .Belonging and valuing others, serving something beyond yourself helps you to connect to a higher reality. In the words of Mahatma Gandhi “be the change you want to see in this world”

Whether you spend your future choosing a career in business, take on public service, become a politician or diplomat, create art and music or serve your fellow citizens as a teacher, a nurse, a social worker or a technician or working with others to keep

the planet alive for the future generations, the key to feeling fulfilled is to recognize the urgent and persistent question in life. What are you doing for others? In other words recognize our common humanity and work towards strengthening those bonds. That is the ideal Canada is built on.

If it were possible for the president of my former US University to be here today, she would smile and remind me that it is a good idea to listen to your elders and teachers, at least sometimes, while you are seeking your own truths and finding your own way in this complicated world.

May each of you be blessed with opportunities to fulfill your life's potential, seek the truth; and contribute to the betterment of humanity, no matter where or how you pursue your career goals. Follow the advice of Ferdinand Magellan, one of the Portuguese explorers, "the sea is dangerous, and its storms terrible but these obstacles have never been sufficient reason to remain ashore".

All of you who are graduating today must thank this institution, the University of British Columbia for providing the tools, role models, inspiration and values to go out into the world and fulfill your dreams. It is my prayer that you will find yourselves as global citizens, dedicated to creating peaceful and just communities and toward creating ONE WORLD.

Martin Luther King told us the following: “If I cannot do great things, I can do small things in a great way”. Let that message ring in your ears whenever you are called upon to take on responsibilities. Congratulations to each and every one of you.

Patsy George

May 24, 2018