

2013 Spring Congregation and Convocation

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Distinguished colleagues, honoured guests, members of the UBC graduating class of 2013.

You are graduating into a complicated and perplexing world. Of course, most generations think that their time is particularly tough. So let's all get a grip. You could be completing your studies at Cambridge in 1348 facing the black death; graduating in the 15th century in Salamanca, subjected to the Spanish Inquisition; in 1835 from Trinity College Dublin with the prospect of starvation from the potato famine all around you; or in 1943 most anywhere in the world, surrounded by war and fear. Our troubles and worries are much less daunting.

Yet it is true that our world is complicated and perplexing. But have courage: few people on earth are better prepared to take the world on, confusing as it is, than you. That's because you have the gift of a university education – not free, but a gift nonetheless – a gift still denied to the vast majority of young people on our globe.

Here is what Albert Einstein had to say about studying:

Teaching should be such that what is offered is perceived as a valuable gift and not as hard duty. Never regard study as duty but as the enviable opportunity to learn to know the liberating influence of beauty in the realm of the spirit for your own personal joy and to the profit of the community to which your later work belongs.

In this brief quote, Einstein ties together four important ideas. First, that teaching and learning are gifts to the individual student. Second, that they are “enviable opportunities, enviable because they are not afforded to everyone. Third, teaching and learning are liberating because they are beautiful in and of themselves, and fourth, they also help the wider community because of what the student has to offer as a result of his or her study.

I want to focus briefly on that fourth point, that an education is a gift not only to the student, but to the entire community. In the most obvious sense, that gift is an offering of what we typically call “skills.” An educated person – whether a journalist, a doctor, a plumber, a chemist, a hairdresser, or an engineer – has a set of skills that can be deployed to create economic value. Governments all around the world are fixated on

this limited notion of education, as a means to generate the skills required to fuel the economy. In times of profound economic change, like now, governments are also rightly concerned to ensure that the skills people are learning match the jobs that will be available.

The risk for governments is that they will keep their sights too low, looking at what is immediately in front of them in a four-year election cycle, failing to see the even greater economic and social changes just over the horizon. If we raise our eyes only a little, we see that “skills” are more than simply content knowledge, more than the technical ability to perform a given function, like removing an appendix, adding up a column of numbers or fitting a pipe. The skills that we need in our fast-changing society include the ability to work effectively in teams; to sift, analyze and evaluate the plethora of information that comes at us minute by minute; to draw creative connections between seemingly disparate phenomena. I could go on.

The gift of education to our community, in Einstein’s terms, is not merely technical knowledge; it is critical capacity, creativity and empathetic judgment – the bread and butter of a university education.

Let me conclude by pursuing the argument one step further. I fear that one of the main reasons that so many governments today shortsightedly conflate education and the acquisition of technical skills is that they have lost sight of who we, the people, are. I don't know whether or not you have noticed, but more and more often, governments around the world describe the people they supposedly serve as "taxpayers." All well and good. But we are much more than that. We are citizens.

The great judge, Louis Brandeis of the US Supreme Court, once described citizenship as "the most important office." He was right. Without engaged, active citizens, no form of governance can be healthy. And engaged, active citizenship is promoted by a good education. I am not saying that you can't be a good citizen without an education; there are millions of examples to the contrary. But the first aim of education is, I believe, to help people become better citizens, not just of countries but of the world. That is why we so often talk of leadership amongst our students, why education is so much more than learning a set of technical skills.

Taxpayers are passive, doing their legal duty by completing their forms and writing cheques. Citizens voice opinions and organize their societies; they take action in the face of injustice and inequality. Educated citizens deploy their critical capacity, creativity and empathetic judgment to become the leaders of citizens. That is your potential, and one that I wish our governments would embrace more fully.

Consider this encouraging idea from the cultural anthropologist, Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." If you think that there are things in the world that need changing, go out and try to make it happen. Be active citizens. That's what your education is for.

Congratulations to each and every one of you, and good luck.