

2011 Fall Congregation

*Professor Stephen J. Toope
President and Vice-Chancellor,
The University of British Columbia*

23-25 November 201F

Distinguished colleagues, honoured guests, members of the UBC graduating class of 2011.

Worried. Anxious. Uncertain. We hear those words a lot these days, mostly in relation to the global economy, but also with respect to our own personal futures. The media focuses on young people who can't find jobs, on cuts that may come in government budgets, resulting in further job losses. It wouldn't be surprising if many of you were feeling just a little unsettled as you contemplate your graduation into what may seem like a rather harsh world.

Perhaps my job today is to bring you some better news: you are not alone. Yes, it is true that you are graduating into a confusing and sometimes troubling world. You will all face problems and unfairness and choices that are very hard. But you are not alone.

Consider this story, told to me many years ago by a wonderful monk:

In Persia, for many centuries now, fathers have taught their sons how to make richly coloured carpets. The boys learn, often from a very early age, by sitting on the father's lap or on a workbench sitting very close and watching Father work. But the boys do not merely observe; every now and then the father will cease tying knots and will encourage the son to take over – in this way, the art is passed on. Now, unskilled fingers are not reliable, and often a boy will make a mistake. When the boy does err, the father will not chastise, nor will he correct the mistake, for it is an element of the master carpet-maker's art to use the error to subtly reformulate the

pattern. The father accepts the son's error and weaves it into the pattern of a carpet they create together.

In repeating the story, I am not romanticizing child labour. But stories have layers of meaning; that is why they are the essential route to human understanding. The surface of the carpet-weavers' story is about ancient traditions, gender roles, hard labour, and children having to work far too young. But another level of the story is about the sharing of tradition, a sense that in everything we do we build on the work of those who have come before, and the idea that we all make mistakes that form the warp and weft of our lives. We only hope that there are folk out there – parents, friends and mentors – who can help us learn to use those mistakes productively.

The talented Lebanese-Canadian writer, Rawi Hage, escaped from Lebanon during the civil war of the 1980s. After a harrowing few years in New York, working in warehouses and living on the edge of homelessness, he came to Montreal. His first novel, *De Niro's Game*, is a deeply disturbing, but evocative, description of how a couple of young men try to survive in war-torn Beirut. It won the prestigious IMPAC Dublin Literary Prize in 2008. Part of the winning citation reads:

De Niro's Game is...a compassionate novel of friendship and betrayal, of love and loss. The war-torn city of Beirut plays host to the bravura of the young men – a city full of marauding militia, cleverly compared with the mad dogs that also haunt its precincts—a city that gradually drags its inhabitants into the blood-red sands of extreme situations and heart-breaking betrayal.

As you can tell, this is not a happy story. But note that despite its subject matter, the novel is described as “compassionate” and as “a novel of friendship.” In his acceptance speech for the IMPAC Dublin Prize,¹ despite the real suffering he has endured, Hage describes himself as a “fortunate man”. His speech is one of extended gratitude: first to “all those women and men of letters, and all artists who have gone beyond the aesthetics of the singular to represent the multiple and diverse, to all those men and women who have chosen the painful and costly portrayal of truth over tribal self-righteousness.” What a powerful way of standing on the shoulders of giants; recognizing that we can draw on the work of our forbearers. We are not alone.

Then Hage thanks his father “who always surrounded me and my brothers with books and stories of travel and wonder.” Just like tying the wool of the carpet together, mistakes and all. Finally, he thanks his mother “who hid me under the dining room table away from the falling bombs, and whose farewell tears on the day of my leaving my native Lebanon are printed in my memory.” The courage to protect and the courage to let go: emotions that I imagine many parents are experiencing in this beautiful hall right now.

Despite its problems, despite the difficulties that we all will face, our world is no cause for fear alone. What Hage’s work, and that of so many great artists, reveals is that even in the hardest moments, there is always promise and there is always hope. The dark ages give way to the Renaissance, Charles Darwin overcomes the death of his beloved daughter to share brilliant empirical insights that still shape our understanding of life, Van Gogh succumbs to mental illness but produces

¹ Reprinted as Rawi Hage, “To roam a borderless world” *The Globe and Mail*, 13 June 2008, A15.

some of the greatest art of his century, the flight from Dunkirk becomes the landings on the beaches of Normandy. In the words of the great Anglo-Irish poet, Louis MacNeice:

For it is true, surprises break and make
As when the baton falls, and all together the hands
On the fiddle bows are pistons, or when, crouched above
His books the scholar suddenly understands
What he has thought for years – or when the inveterate rake
Finds for once that his lust is becoming love.

-from *Mutations*

As you celebrate this great day of graduation, my hope for you is that “surprises break and make” you.

Worried. Anxious. Uncertain.

Promise. Hope. Perseverance.

As we at UBC like to say, Tuum Est, it's up to you. And that's right...but you are not alone.

Thank you.