DAWSON COLLEGE
GRADUATION ADDRESS:

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Professor Stephen J. Toope
President and Vice-Chancellor
The University of British Columbia
Mr Director General, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Parents and Families and Friends of the graduates, Members of the Dawson College Class of 2007.

When Richard Filion asked me to speak at the Dawson College Graduation this year, I did not hesitate for a moment in accepting the invitation. I could not imagine a greater honour than to be with you at graduation in this terrible and remarkable year. Hovering around us tonight is the knowledge that in this year Dawson College became an international symbol of violence and fear. But I know, and you know, that Dawson is so much more than that – so much better than that. And I want to talk tonight about your growth as a class and as a community, your confrontation with hate and hopelessness.

It was Albert Camus who wrote that “an atmosphere of terror hardly encourages reflection.” That is the atmosphere that was created on the 13th of September 2006 at Dawson College. It is an
atmosphere antithetical to places of learning, for schools and colleges and universities ought to be places where reflection is prized above all – critical reflection upon ourselves, our world and our places in the world. “Reflection” is not the self-pitying diatribe of a misfit who posts his hurt and anger online; nor is it sitting at the back of a class and writing violent stories to shock and perhaps to scream for help, as did the Virginia Tech killer. No, reflection is a result of interaction with other human beings engaged in their own exploration; learning, thinking and applying our learning to our own situation in life.

But in our world there have always been destructive people who are closed off from healthy self-reflection, who use violence to attack the intellectual, spiritual and artistic growth of others. On the 1\textsuperscript{st} of May, 1945 Major-General Georges P. Vanier, then serving as Canadian Ambassador to France, broadcast on CBC Radio, reporting on his visit to the Nazi concentration camp at Buchenwald. In reading the transcript of that broadcast, one of
Vanier’s images caught me up short. Vanier described “a famous oak tree at Buchenwald beneath which Goethe wrote some of his poems. The German gaolers found nothing better than to make of the tree a gibbet for hanging men by the armpits with their hands tied behind their backs.”ii No image could better capture the choices that we face, as individuals and as societies. We can learn, we can create, we can flourish. We can stagnate, we can destroy, we can die violently.

Your presence here tonight is an affirmation that you have chosen to transcend violence, to defeat hate. Why have you made that choice? As Vanier reminds us, it is not inevitable. Knowing that one of the greatest poets in any language had been inspired by a beautiful tree at Buchenwald did not preclude a later generation from turning that very tree into a symbol of the worst of the human cruelty.
I hope that you are here tonight because somewhere in your academic career you have been inspired. Someone has excited you – a teacher or a fellow student. Something you have read has fired your imagination. Something said in a class has given you an idea about the future. You know that the world, as hard as it can be, is also filled with promise. I think that you share the moral universe of the wonderful Nigerian novelist and poet, Ben Okri, who writes:

We are the miracles that God made
To taste the bitter fruit of Time.
We are precious.
And one day our suffering
Will turn into the wonders of the earth.

I only began to learn that lesson fully in my thirties. Until then, my life had been relatively uneventful, and I had been encouraged to believe in a beneficent universe. I had been raised in a loving family. I had been blessed with incredible educational opportunities. I had a great job as Dean of Law at McGill, a wonderful wife, a lovely little daughter, and a son who had just arrived. Then one day, during a meeting, I was given an urgent
phone message. I could never have imagined the consequences: I learned later that night that my parents had been brutally murdered in their quiet Beaconsfield home.

Within a couple of days the perpetrators had been caught; three teen-aged boys, who had no real motive, who had killed for fun. The senselessness of the attack was devastating. I imagine that for those of you who lived through the shootings at Dawson, and especially for the family of Anastasia De Sousa, that same shocking and grotesque purposelessness must have caused deep heartache.

How does one react to senseless violence that rips at the core of our world? There is no single answer. People must be allowed to react in their own ways. I can only tell you how I reacted – and the reaction was almost immediate. I said no. No, you pathetic boys are not going to destroy the memory of my parents, who lived rich and gentle lives. No, you are not going to define my existence or
that of my family. No, you will not turn me into a fearful person. No, you will not teach me to hate.

In his majestic novel, *Tess of the D’Urbervilles*, Thomas Hardy authors one of the most evocative and frightening lines in all of English literature. He foretells the inevitability of suffering: “Once victim, always victim.” I stand here today to refute Hardy, to proclaim that victimization is as much an attitude as a condition, and to argue that it is possible to confront and address the effects of violence in our own lives. Dealing with the effects of violence is nevertheless painful, for individuals, for cities and for societies – it does not allow escape, only confrontation; not triumph, only modest gains. But to be a victim of violence is not to lose control over one’s destiny. Our reactions are not programmed, not inevitable.

Here at Dawson, I know that many of you have made similar discoveries. Out of violence and fear, you created art. *Alice in*
Oblivion, a multimedia tour de force, was one way to look forward. In instructor Will Aitkin’s words: “This has been a remarkable group of students. They have taken this material and transformed it into something incredible. I am so impressed – there is nothing sentimental or simplistic about Alice in Oblivion. It’s an honest, intelligent reflection of what these students have been feeling.”

Out of violence and fear, you created political action. You went to Quebec City and to Ottawa, as part of a well coordinated campaign, to demand the strengthening of Canada’s gun control legislation and practices. Already you have succeeded in promoting “Anastasia’s Law” to strengthen the controls over guns in this province. Out of violence and fear, you just went on with your lives, reading poems, solving equations, playing sports. You took to heart the Reverend Sokolowski’s words at Anastasia De Sousa’s funeral: “The book of her life was closed so suddenly; it was such a short life. But the books of our life are still open, so we all have a chance to do something with our life, to change our life, to do something really good.”
So, you are the strong class of 2007. At every graduation, students and their families can look back at hardships overcome, at difficult tasks accomplished, at successes that might not have seemed possible. But this graduation is unique. You are the class that transcended violence and fear. You are the class that fought back simply by getting on with your lives. You are the class that valued learning more than anger, friendship more than enmity, and a future you can shape more than a past you can’t erase.

Every class has teachers to thank, friends to thank, parents and families to thank. I guess that your thanks are even more profound. But I want to tell you that for this very special class, the thanks are also reversed. This city thanks you. This province thanks you. And, coming from far-away British Columbia, I can tell you that the country thanks you. We thank you for your courage and for your fortitude. In displaying that fortitude, you have created a new and powerful symbol. Dawson is much more
than a place where crazed violence stole innocent life. Dawson is a place where students, staff, faculty and families stood up and said: “We are part of a great tradition of learning and reflection. We are the tree under which Goethe wrote. We are the miracles that God made to taste the bitter fruit of time.”

I am so honoured to be with you tonight. Congratulations to every graduate. Congratulations to all your friends and families. Congratulations to the Dawson staff. Congratulations to this strong Dawson community. Thank you.

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1 A. Camus, *Neither Victims nor Executioners* (1946) (“To emerge from this terror, we must be able to reflect and to act accordingly. But an atmosphere of terror hardly encourages reflection.”)