

2013 Fall Congregation

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

27-29 November 2013

Madam Chancellor, Distinguished colleagues; honoured guests; members of the UBC graduating class of 2013. What a great day for you graduates. Congratulations to each and every one of you.

On a day of graduation, it is inevitable that everyone present becomes especially conscious of time. Parents and family are thinking about how only a few short years ago, you lot were in diapers, struggling to put a few words together. Your professors are thinking that it was only yesterday that this class arrived at UBC -- how could the years go by so quickly?

You graduates may have a different sense of time. Doctoral students may be relaxing for the first time in years. Undergraduates may be thinking that they are a bit sad to leave this portion of their life behind; or they may be saying "I am sure glad that's over; I want to get on with my future." No matter -- for all of us, in one way or another, *time* is at the forefront of our thoughts.

But like the Raven in many First Nations traditions, time is a trickster. It catches you off-guard, surprising with its expansion and compression, its sudden hold on your throat. "I can't believe that the paper is due tomorrow!" "Is my baby really twenty-two years old?" "Am I actually graduating today?"

For you graduates, I hope that you have experienced or will come to see your time at UBC as a precious interlude. A time when much of the learning of generations of your ancestors has been laid out for you to

sample, to consider and to challenge; A time of striking compression, when the stories of the natural world, and of humanity and its discoveries, have been crammed together for you to explore. The next steps in your life may be quite different, except for those of you who are choosing to stay on for another degree. For most of you who will go out into the working world, time will start to feel different, exciting in a very different way.

Reading and learning are connected to but fundamentally different from doing. You may not be able to do until you have learned how to do, or at least how to learn to do. But the actual doing can feel different, partly because of the way we experience time. Consider these words of the wonderful Montreal-born essayist, Adam Gopnick:

What makes something interesting to read about is its narrative grip, and stories are, of necessity, exercises in compressing time. What makes something interesting to do is that – through repetition, coordination, perseverance – it *stretches* time.¹

I suspect that as you look back on it, your own story during your degree program was indeed about compressing time. Semesters whirled by. There was never enough time to do everything that you wanted to do. Friends were graduating.

But now many of you are contemplating a very different existence, one without the formal book-ends of semesters and degrees. You face a future that stretches on unknowably, where your work may last for months or

¹ Adam Gopnick, The New Yorker, 4 November 2013, "Bread and Women" 66, at 68.

years or decades – you won't know. That kind of time is different, because it will be a time in which you continually practice your skills, whatever they may be.

Canadian writer Malcom Gladwell recently popularized the 1940s management theory that, even with natural talent, it takes roughly 10,000 hours to truly master a skill.² That sure stretches time! Although mastering your craft, your profession, your business, your vocation can seem daunting as you contemplate those 10,000 hours, or whatever it takes, remember Adam Gopnick's insight which is really encouraging. If, as I hope, you have learned at UBC how to continue learning, your work – which *will* require repetition, coordination and perseverance – should be highly rewarding. It will stretch time, and fill it with interest.

As we like to say at UBC, it's up to you. Keep reading, keep learning and compress time into the story of your life, one you can look back on with pride. Contemporaneously, delve into your work, really practice what motivates you and become expert in whatever you choose to do. Stretch time by creating fascination and depth in your own life. We are proud of all you graduates. Good luck.

² Malcolm Gladwell, *Outliers: The Story of Success* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2008)