

2008 Fall Congregation

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

19-21 November 2008

|

Distinguished colleagues, honoured guests, members of the UBC graduating class of 2008.

It is a great delight for me to welcome our newly minted Chancellor. Not only does it mean that I get to sit in a more comfortable, if less impressive, chair, than I did last spring but I also benefit directly from her wisdom and experience, and from the warmth of her personality. Welcome, Sarah Morgan Sylvester.

As you graduates cross the stage later in the ceremony, you will have your moment in the limelight, but according to the traditions of our university, traditions inherited from almost a thousand years of practice in Europe, you are not really graduates of UBC until after the new Chancellor pronounces three words: “I admit you”.

For the majority of degree candidates, the phrase “I admit you” is said at the end of the ceremony, and covers the entire class. For doctoral candidates, that phrase is said individually as each person crosses the stage. I must acknowledge that many of those doctoral candidates are confused by the words; they find them rather funny,

and they often smile or even laugh as the Chancellor looks at them and says “I admit you”. I can imagine what they are thinking, what *you* may be thinking only minutes from now: Why am I being “admitted” to something? What am I being admitted to? Why is this smiling person in a gold-braided bat-cape saying this to me?

So for a few moments, I want to explore what it means to be “admitted” as a graduate of UBC, one of a select group of globally influential universities in the world today.

I want to dispute one potential notion right at the beginning: you are not being admitted into some secret elite society, with a free throw into success, wealth and happiness. I am not going to stand up here making one of those speeches about how special you are, how you have been chosen.

In fact, my guess is that you are being admitted into more hard work, more struggles and some disappointments. But I hope that you are being admitted into a group that has gained resources and resilience here at UBC to handle what life throws at each one of you. I also

hope that the friendships that you have formed here at UBC will be a source of strength throughout your lives and where-ever you may find yourselves. I still count my university friends as some of my closest; many of you will too. But I encourage you to work at those friendships; don't take them for granted. As you begin new programmes of study or working lives, and as you get busier and busier with families and new friends, take the time to keep in touch with your friends made here at UBC. That network can help sustain you in good times and in bad.

When the Chancellor admits you, then, the admission is to a new stage in your existence, but it is also a promise: a promise that if you make some effort, your UBC roots will continue to spread. The things that you learned here should continue to inform your analysis and your emotions; the people you met here should continue to resonate in memory, and some of them in your daily life.

I still draw on the practice of my own PhD supervisor who was one of the most reliable people I have ever met. When I was trying to finish my PhD dissertation so that I would not have to register for another

term and pay huge international student fees at Cambridge University, I sent in what I hoped would be the final draft of my last chapter. I then discovered that my supervisor, a very distinguished international lawyer, Sir Derek Bowett, was actually away from England conducting a commercial arbitration in Dubai. My heart sank; I figured I would have to write that cheque for thousands of pounds that I didn't have just as my scholarship was coming to an end.

Much to my surprise and delight, five days later I received my final chapter back by courier, with lots of helpful comments and agreement that I could submit my dissertation. That showed organization, as well as remarkable diligence and commitment to students. I try to live up to that model, and I can tell you that it sure made me feel warmly about my university. I hope that most of you will remember an experience where someone here at UBC went the extra distance for you. If not, if you made real efforts that seemed to go unnoticed, that is our failing, not yours.

Today you are being admitted to an alumni body of more than 250,000 graduates spread around the globe. I meet proud and active UBC alums in Shanghai, in Mumbai and in New Westminster. I hope that you will stay connected with your university because you have memories that matter to you, because you have made friends with your talented classmates who have altered the course of your life, because you have learned and been challenged to think critically and creatively.

Above all, I hope that you will stay connected because of the difference you have made here and the difference you will make to the world outside these doors. Like your parents and family and friends, we are proud of you and we want to know what you are up to.

More than twenty-five years ago, the brilliant Anglo-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie published *Midnight's Children*. It won England's prestigious Man Booker Prize, and later a second Booker of Bookers: the prize for the very best novel in the last quarter century. *Midnight's Children* is an allegory that follows the imagined life of the first person born after the stroke of midnight on the day of India's independence,

the 15th of August, 1947. That character, Saleem Sinai, is magically connected to all the other children born in that first hour of independence, and his life mirrors all the hopes, struggles, violence, and beauty of the sub-continent as it weathered the partition of India and Pakistan, inter-communal strife and states of emergency.

Above all, the book is an exploration of identity, of what it is to be human. Near the end of the book, Saleem makes the following declaration:

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me, of all I have been seen done, of everything done-to-me. I am everyone everything whose being-in-the-world affected was affected by mine. I am everything that happens after I've gone that would not have happened if I had not come. Nor am I particularly exceptional in this matter; each "I", every one...of us, contains a similar multitude. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.

-Salmon Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2006, at 440-41.

I hope that your time at UBC has helped you to swallow a world, a world of hard work, of discovery, of ideas, of heart, of frustration, of anger, of hope, of love.

The wider world is waiting for you; it is ready to swallow *you* whole, to give you the opportunity to thrive in friendships, in families, in play, in service, in work. But you have to pay attention, to make choices and to use the tools that you have gained through your education. I urge you to see how you can respond to, shape and change our world.

You can become everything that happens after you've gone that would not have happened if you had not come. What a gift.

What is it to which the Chancellor admits you today? Well, nothing less than life, in all its complexity and richness. I wish every one of you health, happiness and deep fulfillment. Thank you.