

2009 Fall Congregation

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Distinguished colleagues, honoured guests, members of the UBC graduating class of 2009.

A graduation is an obvious time to think about the future. Although you graduates are no doubt also reflecting back over your experiences at UBC – the friends made, the studying done, the exams and papers written, the commitments to clubs, sports, theatre, and music fulfilled – in this moment of transition, it is to the future that we tend to look. Graduates are almost inevitably asking themselves: “What will I do with my life?” or “How can I make a difference in our world?”

Although these moments of reflection can be a little scary, I think that they are supremely valuable. Our lives are so often filled with mere busyness; we are harassed by the technological possibilities of constant communication through text messages, phone calls, tweets, Facebook, blogs. We leave ourselves little opportunity to really think. So, as hard as it is, I urge you graduates to treasure this moment of uncertainty, poised between past and future, and to use it wisely.

My theme today is time and action. One of the pieces of writing that has influenced me most over the years is “Burnt Norton,” a beautiful poem by T.S. Eliot. The first in a cycle called the *Four Quartets*, “Burnt Norton” is an exploration of human life in time and of our difficult relationship to the universe. For Eliot, humanity is trapped in time, but is eager to find redemption, much like people caught in Dante’s Inferno.

Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in time past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable.
What might have been is an abstraction
Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.

“What might have been is an abstraction...”. That is an encouraging idea, I think. Eliot wrote “Burnt Norton” before the Second World War, as Europe was descending into economic and social chaos. The other poems of the *Four Quartets* he wrote during the War. Eliot was active in the war effort on the home front, and he feared the breaking up of society and culture. It is not surprising that Eliot’s theme in these poems was a search for integration, for unity – what in “Burnt Norton” he called “the still point in the turning world.” Eliot suspected that unity could only be achieved outside time. His work

was therefore challenged by some critics as too mystical, too rooted in a particularly Christian view of salvation after life, after time, to speak to the real threats of people confronting crisis and war.

And yet, in the *Four Quartets* Eliot details moments of enlightenment and inspiration in time.

But only in time can the moment in the rose-garden,
The moment in the arbour where the rain beat,
The moment in the draughty church at smokefall
Be remembered; involved with past and future.
Only through time time is conquered.

Instead of reading the poem as entirely an escape from time, I think of that moment in the rose garden as a calling to the here and now, as an assertion that life today matters because the past is unchangeable and the future unpredictable, even unknowable.

Sudden in a shaft of sunlight
Even while the dust moves
There rises the hidden laughter
Of children in the foliage
Quick now, here, now, always—
Ridiculous the waste sad time
Stretching before and after.

“Quick now, here now, always —” This almost breathless phrase connects to one of Eliot’s principal sources for “Burnt Norton,” the

Bhagavad-Gita, a Hindu sacred text. The Gita takes the form of a conversation between Lord Krishna and the brilliant warrior prince, Arjuna, and occurs on the battlefield before the start of a war.

Krishna reveals himself as the Supreme Being and warns that death can come along at any moment, that we cannot simply live for the future.

In a verse that rings loud in any university, Krishna announces:

Out of compassion for them [the human race], I, residing in their hearts, destroy with the shining lamp of knowledge the darkness born of ignorance. (10.11)

In this beautiful space of the Chan Centre, I hope that you graduates have some sense of the shining lamp of knowledge given to each one of us. How will you use yours? Eliot helps us understand that *now* is the time to fulfill our promise. *Now* is the time to be the best that we can be. *Now* is our chance to act in time, and perhaps to accomplish things that transcend time.

We waste time regretting the past and we waste time when we think only about what comes next.

What might have been is an abstraction

Remaining a perpetual possibility
Only in a world of speculation.

Or, in the pithier words of Winston Churchill: “It is better to be making the news than taking it; to be an actor rather than a critic.”

I hope that you will take your own particular light of knowledge, go out those doors, and act...in our time. Thank you.