

UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

CONGREGATION ADDRESS:  
LEADING THROUGH FEAR

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Mr Chancellor, Distinguished Guests, Colleagues, Parents and Families of our graduates, Members of the UBC O Class of 2007.

You graduates are probably feeling pretty excited today. A UBC Congregation marks the end of a period of great intensity; university students tend to live life to the fullest. Intense work, intense friendships, intense hopes, intense dreams – even some forms of intensity that I won't mention today – not in front of your families.

But it wouldn't surprise me if some of you, perhaps most of you, are feeling more complex emotions. Graduation is rarely about pure elation simply because graduation marks endings and beginnings. Endings are a relief, but they can also prompt wistfulness and nostalgia. Beginnings are full of promise, but also full of uncertainty, and uncertainty can lead to trepidation and anxiety, even to fear. In my brief remarks today, I want to talk about fear and leadership.

There is nothing wrong with a little bit of fear. We all experience it from time to time; we may even be genetically programmed to respond to, even to create, our fears. This idea was captured beautifully in a little poem by Philip Larkin. Larkin was an acidic but mild-mannered librarian who also happened to be the poet laureate of England. For those of you who know the poem, you will recognize that I have changed one word for the sake of propriety in a public speech!

They [mess] you up, your mum and dad.  
They may not mean to, but they do.  
They fill you with the faults they had  
And add some extra, just for you.

But they were messed up in their turn  
By fools in old-style hats and coats,  
Who half the time were sappy, stern  
And half at one another's throats.

Man hands on misery to man.  
It deepens like a coastal shelf.  
Get out as early as you can,  
And don't have any kids yourself.

I have three children, so I obviously don't buy Larkin's prescription. But his insight is real: each of us brings to our lives and our decisions talents, experiences and anxieties. We do indeed learn some of those anxieties from our families; others from our friends; still others from the media buzz that surrounds us; some we may create all by ourselves.

We live in a society that is utterly confused about anxiety and fear. On the one hand extreme sports and corporate logos extol the virtue: "no fear". On the other hand, we live in a surveillance society where more and more public space is covered by closed circuit television; where we are told to worry about escalating crime even when we know that the incidence of reported crime is actually declining; where governments issue orange alerts warning us to beware of potential terrorist attacks that, as individuals, we can do precious little to prevent.

Fear is of course a natural reaction in the face of danger. It is smart to fear a black bear approaching our tent at night looking for food. Good leaders fear the possible negative consequences of their actions and decisions even as they know that that must act and decide. It is probably right to fear the hard moral choices that life forces upon us: when to spare someone from a hurtful truth; when to tell the truth at all costs? Fearful questions indeed.

Some fear is healthy, but some is pathological. I believe that healthy fear must incorporate a modicum of self-doubt. Of course, I acknowledge that confidence is an important, even an essential, trait for success in life. One of the greatest gifts that can be bequeathed by parents, and by schools and universities, is the belief that the possibilities of life are open and almost limitless. My parents and my schooling gave me that gift, and I am profoundly grateful.

But overweening self-confidence is a liability. It annoys people around you. More importantly, it is almost always matched by a closed spirit; the person who is utterly confident is not inclined to learn much from others. Leaders lead because they can learn, and inspire others by applying what they have learned. Perhaps ironically, overconfident people are also unlikely to be good at sharing. To believe oneself to be completely self-sufficient is to fail to recognize one's own needs – including the need to give.

In a challenging and moving book called *The Gift*, the American polymath philosopher-sociologist-anthropologist Lewis Hyde observes:

The belief that life is a gift carries with it the corollary feeling that the gifts should not be hoarded. As we mature, and particularly as we come into the isolation of being 'on our own,' we begin to feel the desire to give ourselves away – in love, in marriage, to our work, to the gods, to politics, to children. And adolescence is marked by that restless... disturbing inquisition: Is this the person, this nation, this work, worthy of the life I have to give?

One needs both confidence *and* critical self-reflection to give, or at least to give meaningfully. To lead requires of us that we act confidently, but also that we reflect on, and sometimes correct, our course.

Which brings me back to healthy fear: If we all want to give our lives to something worthy, and I am sure that this is the hope of every graduating student today, how do we find a path to leadership *through* fear? Note that this word “through” is a trickster, a linguistic Raven. I firmly hope that none of you will achieve a sense of the worthy life by cultivating fear, by merely encouraging fear in others. Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, much of our public discourse has been built on fear. Some of the fear has been genuine and well-placed: global terrorism is a deadly reality. But some of the fear has been manipulated and overwrought. It has led to bad policy decisions and dangerous arguments. Some influential politicians have been seduced by Machiavelli’s admonition in the *Discourses* that a republic may have to “break”

its own fundamental “orders” to avoid ruin. I cannot imagine a more dangerous idea in any constitutional democracy, yet this idea finds favour today. It resonates in hearts filled with anxiety and fear. I hope that you will find ways to challenge that kind of fear. No, I don’t advocate that kind of leadership, the kind that exploits fear.

Yet I still hope that you will find ways to lead *through* fear, by which I mean acknowledging fears that are real and finding ways to get past those fears. In our complex, multicultural societies one of the most debilitating fears is the fear of people unlike ourselves. Sharing your gifts in a world as diverse and interconnected as ours means sharing them with people who make us feel really uncomfortable, with people whose attitudes to fundamental issues are different from our own.

Consider the case of a young Nigerian writer named Ben Okri, who went to study in England in the 1970s. He had prodigious

gifts that he wanted to share with the world. Imagine the transition from village life in Nigeria to one of the world's great and dominating academic centres. Almost everyone was different; everyone was hard to read; everyone was potentially frightening. Some of you have made transitions to UBC that were just as hard, just as frightening.

For Ben Okri, the key to his transition was in holding on to the spirituality of African village life and transforming it into works of fiction prized around the globe. Permit me to conclude with a brief excerpt from one of Ben Okri's most beautiful poems, "An African Elegy". This poem is about a particular kind of fear; the fear of an African facing the reality of human suffering all around him. It is a hard poem, but one that holds out great hope. Okri firmly rejects Philip Larkin's solution to life's fears: to get out as fast as possible. Instead, Okri embraces the possibilities present in every single human being, the infinite possibilities in each of you:

And they tell me that  
This life is good  
They tell me to live it gently  
With fire, and always with hope.  
There is wonder here

And there is surprise  
In everything the unseen moves.  
The ocean is full of songs.  
The sky is not an enemy.  
Destiny is our friend.

With my heartiest congratulations to all of the members of the  
UBC class of the 2007, may I share this simple hope: that with  
confidence *and* humility you will find your way through fear to  
leadership, and that you will make destiny your friend. Thank you.