

*2008 Spring Congregation*

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

*21 May to 6 June 2008*

I

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

Today, I hope that you graduates are feeling a sense of freedom. Lab assignments, exams, performances, and papers are over, and you have successfully navigated the bureaucracy of a big university – no mean feat. Believe me, I know. You have reached the big day. Congratulations!

But your liberation today is far deeper than simply marking the end of a degree programme – your liberation today is of a kind that can help you through the rest of your life. That’s what I would like to address for the next few minutes: education as a source of freedom.

Just a few weeks ago I was reading a story in the *Globe and Mail* about the thousands of families displaced by post-election violence in Kenya. Stephanie Nolan, in my view one of the finest journalists that our country has ever produced, was interviewing some little children. One seven- or eight-year-old boy was asked what he hoped for, now that the politicians had managed to find a way out of their impasse.

He answered: “I just want to go to school”. Perhaps it was only my mood that day, but that brief statement struck me like a physical blow. How simple. How profound.

I was thrown back to another day some ten years earlier. I was myself in Kenya, in the town of Kisumu, visiting a friend with whom I had worked on the board of a Canadian development agency. This fellow, Lucas Wadenya, was an inspiration for me. He was so smart, so committed, so articulate, and he had resisted all temptations to join the ranks of international development bureaucrats in Geneva or elsewhere. He was passionate about working close to his own community. I was visiting Lucas for the first time in his home, a simple cinder block structure with three rooms, I seem to remember – but a real cut above the mud huts of most people in the rural areas outside Kisumu.

The moment of blinding insight for me came not from Lucas, but from his young son. I wish I could remember his name. As Lucas, his wife and I chatted, the little boy was playing happily in the dust with a coat hanger bent into the shape of a bicycle. I had seen the boy’s room

on a tour of the house; there weren't any other toys that I could see. "So", I thought, "you really can be happy with very few things."

Don't get me wrong, you should never romanticize poverty. This boy wasn't happy because his parents had few material goods. He was happy, I suspect, because he had a stable existence, with a family, and he may even have sensed that he had prospects for education and change in his own circumstances over the years. He had hope. By local standards he was well-off; by ours he had almost nothing.

Which brings me back to the little boy quoted in the Globe and Mail: "I just want to go to school". For him, school probably represented his home village, from which he had been displaced, and a return to stability; an existence much like that of Lucas's son. But I want to assert that school also just meant school, and he really wanted to go. Why?

I think it is because we know, instinctively almost, that school, an education, represents choices and hope. It means freedom. Now, I know that when you are stuck in the middle of mid-term assignments

and exams, an education can feel anything but liberating; it can seem a grind. But I hope that already, only a few days or weeks after the end of your degree, you are beginning to sense the freedom that a university education provides.

When I talk to our UBC alumni, which I do all the time and all around the world, so many tell me that they realize that university changed the world for them. It certainly did for me. My education transformed my expectations in life; it opened up opportunities that I could never have imagined as a kid. I have been able to work with people from around the globe, and to contribute to society in many countries. I have been invited to fight for causes that I believe in deeply. I have continued to be challenged and to learn. Many of you will share those experiences, I know, thanks to your education.

My only advice is: allow yourself to be freed. Your education is one of the few gifts in life that doesn't atrophy or get consumed. It is a base from which you can keep exploring and building. When Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank and Nobel Laureate, was here at UBC earlier this spring to receive an honorary

degree in a special ceremony to help mark our 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, he issued a challenge to students. He said, “you have choices about where you spend your energy and your talents. You can *choose* to contribute positively to the world.”

Of course, the freedom of an education is no guarantee that any of us will make good choices; all it can do is accord us the *possibility* of making a positive contribution. In his brilliant novel, *The Cellist of Sarajevo*, just published, UBC creative writing instructor, Steven Galloway, imagines how a small group of people in Sarajevo find ways to make their daily lives humane amidst the terrible siege of their city.

The real siege stretched over almost four years from April 1992 to February 1996. In Galloway’s imagined siege, one character is a crack sniper shooting back at the people in the hills who hold the Sarajevans hostage. She becomes an accomplished killer. The sniper distances herself from her real personality by refusing to acknowledge her real name, calling herself only by the *nom de guerre*, Arrow. However, at one crucial moment she makes the

decision to escape from hate and violence, and she reclaims her real self and her real name. The moment is intensely dramatic. Not all of us will be confronted with such life and death challenges, but each one of us will have to make decisions about how to treat other people and how to live our lives with integrity. Our education should be a resource to help us make those decisions wisely because we have all been encouraged to think critically, to seek out personal insights, to ask ourselves who we really are.

Some of you may be feeling less than free today for a reason that we hate to talk about at congregation: student debt. I believe that Canadian public policy has focused too heavily on loans and not nearly enough on grants and bursaries in helping students to pay for higher education. Many people are advocating for change in that balance. But the reality is that too many Canadian students are graduating today with a sense that they don't have choices. When I graduated, my own debts were a worry, but they were manageable, because I had been lucky enough to win generous scholarships. But my three college room-mates graduated with scary debts, and it did shape their immediate life choices. But even here, let me reassure

you, the liberation of education can play out. Even if you find yourself having to choose particular work largely to pay off debts, you do not need to be trapped. My three room-mates paid their debts, and then they used the flexible skills and the critical capacities of their education to work for most of their careers in their chosen fields of public service. Freedom is not necessarily a linear projection from today into the future, but you need never give up on the *promise* of freedom that a university education bequeaths to each and every one of us.

Education does give us choices. A university education gives us more choices. As you explore the choices in your own lives, and learn to build on the opportunities afforded to you here, I ask that you think about how our society can give more choices to others. Only 5% of aboriginal students graduating from high school in BC go on directly to university, versus 17% of all BC students. The situation for aboriginal students is actually much worse when one considers their much lower rate of high school graduation. Around the world, even fewer numbers of young people like you – with similar dreams and



hopes – experience higher education. In Kenya, by no means one of the poorest countries in Africa, the rate of participation is 4%.

So today, exalt in your freedom. Some of you have finished with exams forever. But please think about the greater freedom that your hard work has achieved, the liberation of choices in life, the freedom of hope. Think too about how to extend those choices to more and more of the inhabitants of our planet. Remember that little Kenyan boy: “I just want to go to school”.

Good luck to each and every member of this wonderful graduating class.