

2010 Spring Congregation

UBC Vancouver and Okanagan Campuses

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

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Madam Chancellor, distinguished colleagues, honoured guests, members of the UBC graduating class of 2010.

Strive: to make great efforts to do one's best; to try very hard

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To compete; to vie.

(Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, 2d ed, 1983).

Well graduates, I am sure that over your time at UBC, you have all striven mightily – or you would not be here today. So my first words must be of congratulation. I am thrilled that you are now joining the alumni of UBC, a powerful force, some 250,000 strong. Parents, grandparents, siblings and friends, let's give our graduates a well-deserved round of applause!

But graduates, I bring you some chastening news: the striving has only just begun. I bring that news most recently from India, from whence I returned only a couple of weeks ago, on my fourth trip since becoming President of UBC.

Here's what I mean: everywhere you look in the major cities of India you will see ads for tutors, for preparatory colleges, for exam cramming books. As you drive across the countryside of rural India, you will see hundreds, and I mean hundreds, of tiny business colleges, and engineering schools on the outskirts of towns. They may not yet be very good, but they represent desire; the desire of millions upon millions of young Indians for education. Those Indians are striving, striving against remarkable odds, striving in ways that most of us in this privileged land of Canada can hardly imagine. Every time I go to India (and I could say the same about China, or Vietnam, or Kenya), I am humbled by the desire to succeed, the striving, that I see.

In UBC's new strategic plan, *Place and Promise*, we commit ourselves to foster even greater international engagement, arguing that “[g]reat universities are bridges between communities and continents, hubs of intellectual and cultural interchange.” In parallel, UBC declares that it must do more to promote intercultural understanding, because “[w]e are one humanity and each deeply different. We may find no better place in which to embrace this paradox than the university.”

These are not platitudes, my friends. They are not simply feel-good statements about how nice it would be to promote good will amongst all peoples. My travels across the globe, my work in international human rights, tell me that international engagement and intercultural understanding are imperatives. If we do not embrace the opportunities presented to us to transcend our borders and to better understand our fellow human beings, we will quite simply, be left behind. Left behind in a world that is striving harder than are we. That's the chastening news for you graduates, for all of us in this most beautiful part of a beautiful land.

Don't get me wrong. I don't romanticize the "rising east". India, and China for that matter, faces problems that are daunting in scope and scale. I just met with the Indian Minister of Human Resources in Delhi, and he told me that he believed that to continue with its economic expansion, India would have to create some 800 new universities in the next decade or so, each with roughly 60,000 students. That is 800 new UBCs with 4,800,000 new student spaces. India will strive to do this while at the same time having to deal with persistent drought, environmental degradation, ethnic tension, various forms of terrorism, and a sclerotic bureaucracy. But we in Canada

need to understand that the ambition of India is breathtaking, and that the striving, the competitiveness, is insistent.

This ambition and competitiveness hit me like a ton of bricks as I experienced again the drama of Indian roads. On my last trip, I had a driver who took me across the Rajasthani countryside. He was brilliant, navigating between vehicles with only millimeters to spare at roughly 100 kilometers an hour, finding tiny country roads when the highway was closed, evading gigantic potholes and cows ambling down laneways. He was actually pretty safe, but he was unbelievably motivated to show that he was faster and more nimble than every other driver on the road. I thought to myself: “no wonder there are so many Indian scientists, engineers, software designers scattered across the globe. In this culture, you have to strive so hard to make good. And the reflexes are amazing. I am sure that between China and India the electronic gaming industry will soon be utterly captured. Good luck Canada!

The stakes are not only economic. At UBC, our vision statement highlights our commitment to fostering global citizenship and advancing a civil and sustainable society. These commitments are part of the wider values that

have long animated Canadian society, albeit imperfectly. The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* protects basic liberties such as the freedoms of speech, association and assembly, but it also guarantees equality and non-discrimination on grounds of race, national or ethnic origin, colour, religion, sex, age or mental or physical disability. Court interpretation has added non-discrimination protections for sexual minorities as well. Many people choose to immigrate to Canada, including many of you in this room, not only to pursue economic opportunity, but to live in a society marked by inclusion and civility.

In a world of increasing mobility, contested values, and strong challenges to Western philosophical traditions, the striving of various peoples and cultures will have powerful political and social implications as you graduates make your lives and careers. The challenges that you will face are not only in competition for exciting jobs, they are in competition over social and personal values as well, and over cultural influence. For those of you who already live out the bridging of cultures in your own lives, for first or second generation Canadians, consider yourselves fortunate. You may already have developed tools that we will all need to live in a world of growing international and intercultural mixing.

So my message, though rooted in recognition of the increasing complexity of our own societies, is actually pretty simple. On this marvelous day, the day that marks your own great achievement as a newly minted graduate, please try to avoid that great Canadian disease: complacency. Bono once said that “the world needs more Canada”. While that may be true, I don’t think the world knows it. If we don’t invest in our own future by increasing our educational standards, by improving our capacity to create innovative solutions to fundamental problems, by enhancing our productivity, Canada will become a lovely backwater.

The world out there is filled with millions upon millions of people who want their life and the lives of their children to be better than the lives of their parents. They are educating themselves to make that happen. They are working very hard. So, I hope that you graduates will strive to protect and promote the values that you hold dear. Strive to better understand the people of diverse backgrounds sitting right around you. Strive to integrate the gifts that international experiences can bring to your life. Strive always to do your best. Congratulations, and good luck.