

*2012 Spring Congregation and Convocation*

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Distinguished colleagues, honoured guests, members of the UBC graduating class of 2012.

What is the point of a university education? No doubt a few of you are asking that question as you sit today, at graduation, poised on the cusp of a new life – a life full of promise, but also with the inevitable uncertainty that marks all transitions.

Recently, I was privileged to hear an address by the great Mexican essayist and novelist, Carlos Fuentes. Sadly, he died only a few days after I heard him speak. He was reflecting upon the role of universities, and I think that he said something profound. He argued that the university is a place where “people learn to be freer.”<sup>i</sup>

Some of that freedom is physical and emotional – in university most of us move quickly on that continuum of learning who we are. We may live on our own for the first time, away from our families. Even if we live at home, our sense of independence, of freedom, is likely to grow. We spend more time with friends and classmates than with our families. Our parents don’t have the day-to-day influence they had in our childhood. Before you parents get angry with me, let me tell you that I share your pain. My eldest daughter is studying in Europe. Her freedom is a constant challenge to my need to protect and connect!

But of course, Fuentes was talking about something bigger than physical freedom, and something additional to emotional freedom. When he speaks of a university as a place where “people learn to be freer,” he means freer intellectually, even spiritually. I hope that your time at the University of

British Columbia has opened up new worlds of ideas to you. I hope that your teachers and classmates have challenged you so profoundly that some of your deepest assumptions have been rocked. I hope that you have been introduced to cultures and world views that have caused you to question your fixed ideas. In short, I hope that you are freer today than when you arrived here – freer of prejudice, freer of settled points of view that prevent you from seeing other ways of thinking, freer of assumptions that cloud analysis and block emotions.

How does that happen? How does education help make you freer? Well, oddly, it is in large measure through intellectual discipline and the recognition of boundaries that freedom is built. In the last few months a rather interesting, if seemingly arcane, debate has opened up in the pages of some leading magazines and in the blogosphere over the utility of “brainstorming.” At first blush, “brainstorming” would seem to rely on the value of unfettered creativity, on unshaped thinking.

Indeed, at its inception, in the 1940s, “brainstorming” was described by the person who coined the term, Alex Osborne, an advertising executive, as a creative process that requires the free flow of ideas in a group, without any criticism or negative feedback. Osborne suggested that “[c]reativity is so delicate a flower that praise tends to make it bloom while discouragement often nips it in the bud.”<sup>iii</sup>

It turns out that pretty compelling research does not support Osborne’s view. Professor Keith Sawyer, a psychologist at the University of Washington, concludes that “[d]ecades of research [has] consistently shown that brainstorming groups think of far fewer ideas than the same

number of people who work alone and later pool their ideas.”<sup>iii</sup> Does that mean that all those group projects you did in high school and here at UBC were a waste of time? That we humans are intellectual isolates who don’t need to work together?

Well, happily, it does not. In a recent article in *The New Yorker*, the young and very cool science writer, Jonah Lehrer, reviews fascinating research that shows convincingly that the very best way to produce ideas is not solitary confinement. But nor is it free association in a group. In the words of Professor Charlan Nemeth of Berkeley, “[o]ur findings show that debate and criticism do not inhibit ideas but, rather, stimulate them relative to every other condition.”<sup>iv</sup> An increasingly powerful body of research reveals that the notion of the creative superhero, the lonely artist, is a myth: creativity is rooted in social interaction. Philosopher August Comte opined that “[t]he most profound thinker will...never forget that all men must be regarded as coadjutors in discovering truth.”<sup>v</sup>

We may or may not agree that “truth” is there to discover, but at the very least we are more likely to be able to *approach* truth in settings where our ideas are challenged, where our assumptions are tested, where open debate is encouraged. We are actually *freer* when our own thoughts are disciplined in discourse with our teachers and peers. Life is full of surprises; we will never have all the answers. You surely do not have all the answers today, just because you are graduates of a great university. As Fuentes reminds us: “Education contains the questions that are still to come.” That is the point of a university education. Good luck to you all!

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<sup>i</sup> Carlos Fuentes, Keynote Address, Conference of the Americas on International Education, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 26 April 2012.

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted in Jonah Lehrer, "Groupthink: the brainstorming myth," *The New Yorker*, 30 January 2012, 22, at 22.

<sup>iii</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, at 23.

<sup>iv</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, at 24.

<sup>v</sup> Quoted in R. Keith Sawyer, *Explaining Creativity[:] The Science of Human Innovation* (2006).