

2012 Fall Congregation

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

21-23 November 2012

Madam Chancellor, Distinguished colleagues; honoured guests; members of the UBC graduating class of 2012. What a great day for you graduates. You've worked hard and you've made it. Congratulations!

But I am afraid that there is one final test before you graduate: how many of you know who "Joseph Anton" is? [Look to professors on platform as well]? Not good enough – I may just have to call this off!

Alright, I admit that my question is a trick, the sort of question one should never see on a real exam. "Joseph Anton" was the name the brilliant novelist Salman Rushdie used for *eleven years* as he hid from the unconscionable death decree imposed upon him arbitrarily by the then-supreme ruler of Iran, the Ayatollah Khomeini. Rushdie made up the name at the request of the British security services protecting him. He simply combined the first names of two of his favourite writers, Joseph Conrad and Anton Chekhov.

"Salman Rushdie" and "Joseph Anton:" Are they the same person? Not quite, for the fake name was chosen in part to disguise Rushdie's identity as an Anglo-Indian of Muslim heritage. And consider the "godfathers," as Rushdie calls them, whose names he chose. Conrad, a Pole who wrote in English of voyages into the heart of darkness, of wanderers hiding their identities. Chekhov, a nostalgic Russian depicting the very moment of change from a static but reassuring old world to a new one full of doubt.

Although forced upon him in a cruel and unjust way, the choice that Rushdie made to call himself "Joseph Anton" seems to me a perfect metaphor for the complexity that we all face in a world where old certainties

are constantly challenged, where even who we are cannot be answered simply or singularly.

Rushdie himself describes his life's work as an attempt to address "the great question of *how the world joins up* – not only how the East flows into the West and the West into the East but how the past shapes the present even as the present changes our understanding of the past. ..."i That's a tall order, but I suspect that in our own small ways, we are all struggling with the same question.

I couldn't think of a better question for you to ask yourselves on this day of graduation: How does the world "join up"? To try to answer it, you will have to draw on what you learned in your families and with friends, on what you learned from teachers and professors, on what you learned through your independent academic work, on what you learned from your ethical and faith explorations, on what you learned from your community volunteering, on what you learned on the sports field or in choir, or in going global. In short, to even begin to answer how the world joins up, you will have to begin to integrate everything you know into who you are.

But – and here is the irony – the integration of all those ways of knowing probably won't make you a unitary you. Bringing all that you have learned together will most likely reinforce a sense that your own identity is multiple: son or daughter; sister or brother; Canadian, Iranian, Chinese; scientist; philosopher; Afro-Canadian or Inuit; gay, straight or bi; a deeply frustrated member of the hockey nation.

I hope that your university education has helped you to work that all through, not to find singularity, but to embrace complexity even within

yourself. I hope that you have learned that the best answer is a better question; that you are most able to know when most open to doubt.

Consider the admonition of Amit Majmudar, a young American novelist, poet and diagnostic nuclear radiologist. This poem is called:

To The Hyphenated Poets

Richer than mother's milk
is half-and-half.
Friends of two minds,
redouble your craft.

...

Oneness? Pure chimera.
Splendor is spliced.
Make your halves into something
twice your size,

your tongue a hyphen joining
nation to nation.
Recombine, become a thing
of your own creation,

a many-minded mongrel,
the line's renewal,
self-made and twofold,
soul and dual.ⁱⁱ

I trust that none of you will ever have to live a life like Joseph Anton's. But I hope that all of you will take up the challenge to figure out just how the world joins up. You can be "a many-minded mongrel." Your tongue can be "a hyphen joining nation to nation." Delight in your own complexity, and that of our world, because "splendor is spliced." Good luck.

ⁱ Salman Rushdie, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir* (New York: Random House, 2012).

ⁱⁱ Amit Majumdar, “To The Hyphenated Poets” in *The New Yorker*, 17 September 2012, at 86.