

THE J.W. MCCONNELL FAMILY FOUNDATION

Convocation Address at Dalhousie University
Address by
Tim Brodhead
President and CEO of The J.W. McConnell Family Foundation
as he was awarded the degree of Doctor of Laws (honoris causa)
by Dalhousie University
Halifax, Nova Scotia
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Mr. Chancellor, President Traves, honoured guests, faculty, and – most importantly – fellow graduates, parents, supporters and family.

This is the part of the ceremony when you, who have worked hard and postponed many earthly pleasures to earn your degree, have to pause briefly to listen to someone who hasn't, give you gratuitous advice which you will promptly ignore. The good news is that it is only ten minutes, and there is no test.

Nonetheless, as they say of the body at an Irish wake, it has to be there, even if no one expects it to have much to say!

Faculty members and those of you who make a habit of collecting degrees will know that convocation speeches consist of equal parts congratulations to the graduates, earnest pointers on how to live the good life, and a rapid *tour d'horizon* of the challenges you will face. The congratulations are the easy part, and they are heartfelt. I salute your achievement not just because you have worked hard to earn it, but also because – let's be honest – we need you out there. There are some big problems in the world, and we'd rather you not waste any time before tackling them.

A few years ago the American journalist Tom Brokaw wrote a book titled *The Greatest Generation*. It wasn't about my generation; it was about the generation that lived through the Depression and the Second World War, that defeated Nazism and set the foundations for economic prosperity that has lasted pretty much until the present day – at least for those of us lucky enough to be born in the rich world. The generation of my parents and your grandparents. Strangely enough, it was a generation that mostly did not have the benefit of post-secondary education – but we won't pursue that thought now.

I am sorry to say that if Mr. Brokaw gets around to writing a sequel, a book about my generation, it won't even be titled "the second-best generation." We grew up – in North America – in prosperity, and mainly in peace. We graduated into waiting jobs or we traveled the world, or we volunteered to teach in the newly independent former colonies. We accepted all this as our due, and yes, we wanted to change the world. We were sincere about changing the world; we just didn't see any particular need to change ourselves. In fact, not to put it too crassly, we sometimes thought that what was needed was for the world to be more like us!

In a way, we started off well, with the struggles for civil rights in the U.S., and against apartheid in South Africa. But then we got distracted, or maybe just too comfortable. We never quite got around to addressing the situation of aboriginal people right here in Canada, and before we knew it, it seemed perfectly natural that the ratio between highest paid and the lowest paid in our workplaces should grow from 7 X to 70 X.

We inherited the greatest opportunities to change the world lastingly for the better that any generation has had in the history of humanity. Our parents showed the way with the Marshall Plan to rebuild war-shattered Europe. We had an even greater opportunity, to overcome the legacy of a century or two of colonialism, to bridge the divide between the world's privileged and the dispossessed, and we had twenty-five years of wealth creation to do it with. We failed. No, we didn't fail; we didn't try. We witnessed the collapse of communism and the end of the Cold War, potentially freeing up billions to create a better life for everyone on the planet – adequate education and health care, opportunity and a decent standard of living, hell, even just a modicum of human dignity, but tax cuts and more disposable income for the better-off seemed more urgent. We didn't intend not to leave enough oil for you and your children, but those SUVs are thirsty critters! We saw that it was possible to eradicate scourges that had plagued mankind forever – like smallpox and polio – at no great cost, but then the HIV/AIDS pandemic came along and found Stephen Lewis and a handful of community activists crying in the desert, begging for the resources that could potentially save millions. Besides, we had to work on a cure for obesity, and ADD.

Well, as Margaret Atwood said, when you spill milk, after you finish crying you are left with a glass that is either half empty or half full. I think we are giving you the glass half empty, but if I were in your place I would see it as half full.

There is after all a silver lining to my generation's dereliction of duty (or ADD, if you prefer). You will have the responsibility and honour of finishing what we only started: you will be able to finally find the cure for many of today's diseases; you will get us off our crack addiction to fossil fuels and onto more sustainable alternatives; you will make real our claim to see others as our equals by re-fashioning our global economic system so that it doesn't just serve the interests of the well-off and more powerful.

But you will also be tempted, as we were, to postpone those hard tasks in favour of some short-term gratification, to give in to the comforting feeling of powerlessness ("what difference can one person make?"), to succumb to the invidious message "Be realistic!", which really signifies, "accept the status quo."

Why do I think it will be different for you than for us? We were luckier, in a sense. We thought we had the luxury of not having to choose - maybe it is true our ecological life-support systems are degrading, and three million souls perished in the Congo and our political leaders have still not honoured the pledges they made over a decade ago to eradicate child poverty in Canada, but it is hard to change human nature, and who are we to intervene in others' quarrels, and government isn't our collective instrument to manage society but a meddling tool in the hands of corrupt and incompetent bureaucrats. We'll get around to dealing with the problems in good time.

Well, the good time is here, and, as Oscar Wilde said, "the basis for optimism is simple terror." We are near a tipping point, when change will come whether we choose it or not. We can't know what will finally tip us over – climate change, or the revolt of those who can see – but not share – our prosperity, or the slow but epochal shift of global economic power from Europe and North America to Asia.

Thomas' Theorem in sociology says "what is perceived as real is real in its consequences." If your generation thinks it must and can change the world, you will change the world. You have the resources, you have the education, all that you have to do is supply the critical faculties Dalhousie has honed to see through the "I'm all right, Jack" images purveyed by the media, the easy cynicism that kept many of the best of my generation aloof from involvement in politics, and the fear of failure that provides an alibi against trying. You will fail, sometimes; otherwise you are not setting your goals high enough. But as Marianne Williamson says, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness, that most frightens us."

I see evidence of that light every day in the young social entrepreneurs and innovators who are bringing their intelligence, their plugged-in knowledge of the world, and their formidable energy to tackle urgent social and economic problems both in Canada and abroad. They fill me with optimism! And they, unlike many of us, understand that to change the world you must first change yourself; *you must be the change you seek!*

It bears repeating on this momentous day: you are powerful, and you are blessed. An unknown author wrote:

If you woke up this morning with more health than illness, you are more blessed than the million who will not survive this week.

If you have never experienced the danger of battle, the loneliness of imprisonment, the agony of torture, or the pangs of starvation, you are ahead of 500 million people in the world.

If you have food in the refrigerator, clothes on your back, a roof overhead and a place to sleep, you are richer than 75% of this world.

If you have money in the bank, in your wallet, and spare change in a dish someplace, you are among the top 8% of the world's wealthy.

If you hold up your head with a smile on your face and are truly thankful, you are blessed because the majority can, but most do not.

Let me close by quoting the great American philosopher, Dr Seuss:

*You have brains in your heads.
You have feet in your shoes.
You can steer yourself
Any direction you choose.
You're on your own. And you know what you know.
And YOU are the guy who'll decide where to go!*

To all of you, Bon voyage! The world awaits... and needs you!