

Convocation Address to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and the Faculty of Education,
University of Western Ontario, June 15, 2007

Colouring Outside the Lines

My usual audience is aged three to six. The children sit on squares of carpet zipping and unzipping the Velcro tabs on their sneakers. Some of them wander, at least one needs to go to the bathroom. Some kids shove beans up their noses, others nap, There's been the odd, " Miss! Miss! He's going to throw-up." emergency. Once I did a reading at a large school where each of the hundreds of children wore a hat—a turtle hat made from a paper plate painted green with four extended paper legs and topped off with a bobbing head. So, it's a welcome change talking to adults—although your caps aren't nearly as much fun-- and I would like to thank, Jim Weese the Dean of Health Sciences, President Davenport, Chancellor Labatt, and members of the University of Western Ontario Senate, for giving me this honour and the chance to share this day with all of you..... grownups.

To acknowledge a writer for children with a honorary degree makes me grateful and hopeful. I take it to mean that the culture of children, that the well-being of children, that the worth of children is highly valued by this University. I will take this opportunity to share my hopes and my concerns about Canada's children.

Today, it is time to revel in your achievements, to throw your hats into the air and take a moment to feel the pride of the people around you. They have guided you, encouraged you, challenged you, perhaps even sprung for a home cooked dinner when your fridge was reduced to a pot of day-old KD and the dregs of ketchup. None of us achieves anything of value alone. Today, do not think about the bills or your beat-up car or the wardrobe you'll need for your job interview. To borrow a phrase from a company you all know well-- Education? Priceless. The value of what you have learned and discovered at Western will become clear as you share your talents as teachers, counselors, researchers, post-doctoral fellows and developers of curriculum. Graduation isn't the end but the beginning. As Henry Adams said, "A teacher affects eternity; he, and I will add, she, can never tell where his or her influence stops."

First our parents, and then our teachers influence how we think about ourselves and our abilities. In tenth grade, Madame Daoust returned a creative writing assignment to me and said, "I think you write well." What an insightful comment because it implied that I could do better and she would be there to guide me. I had another teacher—a man whose name I can't remember—although I carry an image of a short man in a black suit – shoulders dusted with dandruff. My fifth grade class was preparing to sing at the Kiwanis Music Festival and he suggested that I only mouth the words. From that moment I believed myself to be tone deaf, and incapable of finding the right pitch. It is only now that I study with a compassionate, talented teacher that I have found my voice.

While I may only belt out a little Aretha in the shower it makes me wonder how many children are silenced by one comment from a thoughtless teacher and how many more develop a passion, empathy and humanity when a teacher showed faith in the student's ability to learn and gave a few well-chosen words.

How do you want to be remembered by the students who'll pass through your classrooms and offices forty years from now?

I hope you will give them the ability to think, to be creative, to be innovative, to be flexible and capable of responding to rapidly changing problems because those who look ahead tell us that unless we help our children develop ingenuity, we are doomed as a nation, perhaps even as a species.

But I write stories for children and I choose to believe that we can create a storybook ending for the more than two million children who are between the ages of zero and six living in Canada today, at least one-quarter of them identified by the Early Years Study Two with physical, social/emotional or cognitive difficulties likely to cause problems in later life. I'd like to change the plot for Canada's illiterate, impoverished, malnourished and unhealthy kids, too.

The joy of working with children is that their curiosity, tenacity, sense of wonder and endearing habit of wanting to know why and refusing to accept the response, "just because", is contagious. And so I ask, simply, why is Canada failing its children?" Could it possibly be that we are a nation more concerned with institutions, rules, bureaucracies, territorial rights and tradition than what economists and bankers have targeted as our most important future resource, and best investment-- our children?

Are we a nation without a spark of imagination? Are we really, as the Conference Board of Canada tells us—mediocre, complacent and afraid of risk? Is that who we want to be?

As a former Occupational Therapist, I am interested in the cognitive, and emotional development of our children. The Early Years Study, one and two, tell us that because of an explosion of knowledge in neuroscience and child development that we know the most important time to lay the foundations for healthy, educated, capable people is from the womb until six years of age. The human brain is most receptive to stimuli in this time frame so much so that everything we become as adults is established in these early years.

It is a study crucial to our future, but the authors appear dismayed that our systems are slow in responding to this vital information. The authors write: "Not only do we know what sorts of early child development programs will enable us to develop highly competent, healthy populations, but we are even at the point where we can begin to institute programs that will significantly reduce the number of children suffering from developmental, psychological, and behavioral problems."

We still have no national childcare policy. This is not about babysitting, it is about early learning. Some innovative early learning programs have started. They begin with pre-natal care and provide education and nurturing for parents and children in a setting integrated with recreational facilities, libraries, and elementary schools. These are shining beacons. There are parents, educators, private investors, and some corporations, trying to change the system.

On the other hand we have our entrenched no- can- do- nay Sayers who, even in the face of evidence, favour the status quo rather than doing what is best for our children and for our country in favour of maintaining the plodding, fractious, dull, stodgy ways things have always been done. We all love our extended summer holidays but is this best for our children? Why do follow a schedule based on farming when most of Ontario is urban and children have to relearn material every Fall?

Again, because of advances in neuroscience and imaging we know more about the teenage brain, too. Adolescents aren't lazy and too tired to keep their heads up in class because of their personalities or habits. Their brains are wired differently than adults and school start times force teens to act alert when their brains are actually in sleep mode. The participants of a workshop on sleepiness and the health and performance of adolescent students in 2002 learned that research shows us that there is a direct relationship between adequate sleep and achievement, behaviour and development in teens.

As somebody who likes easy solutions, I slap myself on the head and say, "Wow! what if high school started after lunch when the kids are awake? Is that hard to do?" Apparently, yes. Four government departments are involved—each with competing interests. The workshop resulted in a number of positive initiatives and a call for more research, more evidence. Still we know that in a survey of more than three thousand high school students in the U.S. those who earned As and Bs reported 25 more minutes of sleep each night than those with Cs, Ds and Fs. When schools in Minnesota changed start times from 7:15 am to 8:40 am, average sleep times increased by one hour, daily

attendance improved, drop-out rates decreased. Students reported improved behaviour and less depression.

It all sounds so easy and it makes so much sense. Just let the kids sleep in. Start school later. So I was dismayed to read in the conclusions of the report that an obstacle to helping our teens is that, "Systematic changes, such as altering school start time, timing of subject matter through out the day, or changing the curriculum are perceived to be extremely difficult and costly to accomplish." Too difficult to accomplish when we wring our hands about drop-out rates, behaviour in the classroom and students who don't seem to want to learn? Too costly when we know the eventual social costs of an undereducated population? We need a change and I hope that somebody sitting in this audience today is willing to take that risk. .

How can we develop a generation of innovators, creators, and thinkers without a national will and a visionary policy that provides universal, comprehensive, accessible integrated networks dedicated to implementing everything we know about "growing people" to be the best they can be—by age six—ready to learn and to contribute—if changing school times seems insurmountable? If professionals all dedicated to raising our children can't agree on whose responsibility it is to plan the program then how can we teach children to be flexible? Any child can tell you that you have to take your turn in the sandbox and share the toys—can somebody please tell that to our squabbling provincial leaders who should all be slamming their fists on the table saying... we can work together toward a great solution for the sake of our children, for the sake of Canada. Imagine how magnificent this country could be if every child was given a fair chance from the moment of conception. There is a blueprint in the Early Years reports and if the

recommendations were implemented there's a good chance our children from sea to sea to sea would be healthier, happier, ready to maximize their talents.

But like Tinker Bell in Peter Pan, we all need to believe we can do it. Let us be a nation with a vision and a purpose. Let Canada be a place where children come first. It's no longer enough to think outside the box... we have to imagine that there is NO box. We have to follow the lead of children who are born with the ability to learn, to create, to be flexible, to be innovative and start colouring outside the lines.

The job of an educator is to teach students to see the vitality in themselves.

Joseph Campbell

Everything should be made as simple as possible, but not simpler.

Albert

Einstein