

June 7, 2012 Convocation Address
Faculty of Social Sciences
Brock University



Dr. June Corman, Recipient of the Graduate Mentor Award, 2012

Convocation Address Given to Students Graduating From Child and Youth
Studies, Psychology, and Sociology

Congratulations class of 2012, you've done it. Your professors, your family and your friends are delighted to celebrate with you - those who are here today and those unable to attend. Before me I see majors from three departments --- Child and Youth Studies, Psychology and Sociology.

During the years you spent at Brock you gained knowledge, but during these years, you also experienced new opportunities, you negotiated challenges, and you discovered new things about yourselves.

You may not yet know your next step because the world is an uncertain place; political regimes, economic systems and social norms are in a state of flux, worldwide. By working hard to accomplish your degree, you have proven that all of you have the capacity to accomplish goals.

Dr. Tom Dunk, the Dean of Social Science invited me to give the convocation address because I am the recipient of the Graduate Mentor Award for 2012. I offered my students direction and support and in turn they gifted to me new insight on complex social issues.

The attentiveness that I give to students can be linked to my childhood on a farm in rural Saskatchewan. I grew up helping on the farm and watching farm families help each other and build strong social institutions. I saw farm families 'be there' for their neighbours and 'be there' to build their community. As I moved from the farm to the city and to a job in a university setting, I realized that taking the time 'to be a good neighbour' is rewarding whether the neighbours live on your street, or are students in the classroom, or strangers in trouble in other countries.

My experiences on the farm also gave me a profound respect for how my behaviour has consequences for others. My brother and I had the job of clearing the fields of stones in preparation for seeding the wheat. One day we had filled the wagon - 12 feet long by 3 feet wide - brimming with stones and were riding on top of the stones as our father drove the tractor that pulled the wagon. As usual for children, and we were only 9 and 7 at the time, we were fiddling around instead of holding on to the railing of the back of the wagon. As a result of the pushing and pulling, my younger brother fell onto the ground in front of the tire of the loaded stone wagon. Fortunately he fell on soft ground. When the tire rolled over his chest, he sank into the field and was not hurt.

I was profoundly affected. My inattention, my cavalier playfulness, my hasty actions almost cost my brother his life. That experience taught me the importance of life: the importance of every person's life. That experience taught me that my behaviour has monumental consequences: disastrous or positive, intentional or unintentional.

Those of you who studied Sociology - at least three quarters of the graduates in this audience- remember the insight from one of the most renowned sociologists, C. Wright Mills: Personal Problems are Public Issues. Mills encouraged people to actively engage to ensure equitable opportunities for all: in North America and other countries. He encouraged people to be ACTORS not BYSTANDERS. Each of you will fashion your life as ACTORS according to your own formative experiences. Some of your formative experiences came from your childhood and other influences have come from your time at Brock University.

During your years at Brock you have exposed yourself to different ways of thinking. You have learned to question critically and to argue thoughtfully. You have brought academic integrity to your work. You approached your first class with shyness and hesitation to speak. With practice, you gained the

confidence to raise your hand in class and present your reasoned viewpoint. With the privilege conferred by your education comes the responsibility to raise your hand in the world.

Everyday, you witness major world events live and in colour. Within your time at Brock, you have witnessed young people your age -in Tunisia, in Libya, in Egypt, in Russia, in Syria - march the streets, often in the face of bullets, to demand a more fair and equitable world. But unlike a good detective novel or super hero movie - in which a clever sleuth jails the bad criminal - none of these situations are resolved. Your generation, the youth in all countries, will continue to take up these and other struggles.

Problems in one country are global issues. Events faced by those young people in Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and South America also spill over into our lives in Canada. On June 1st, CBC radio reported that Chevron corporation- while producing oil and gas in Ecuador for consumption in the United States - dumped toxic waste in rural Ecuador. The toxic waste, according to a court ruling in Ecuador, caused severe health damage to Indigenous People. Chevron fled the country without paying the court-ordered payment to the injured people - money to be used for medical treatment.

The Indigenous Peoples of Ecuador have asked a Canadian court to enforce the legal ruling against Chevron. People in three counties - Ecuador, United States and Canada, are tied together by the actions of one multi-national company. This example shows that you have membership in the people of the world and that you will be call on to act as such.

I will conclude by quoting poetry written by Nazim Hikmet, who is recognized as one of the greatest poets of the 20th century. He was jailed for views and actions that opposed the Turkish dictatorial and repressive regimes in the 1940s and 1950s. Through his poetry, Hikmet encouraged people not to be passive viewers of the tragic events that they witness on a daily basis. Hikmet wrote:

*“Living is no laughing matter:
you must live with great seriousness*

... living must be your whole occupation.

...

*I mean, you must take living so seriously
that even at seventy, for example, you’ll plant olive trees*

... because living weighs heavier than death.” 1

Jean Piage, a distinguished psychologist, would have agreed. Piage contended that people can save societies from collapse by become informed

and acting. He wrote "*education is capable of saving our societies from possible collapse, whether violent, or gradual.*"² You are positioned, with your education, as Piaget suggested, to make contributions to the world. Your studies at Brock have equipped you to see the connections between the decisions that you make in your life and how these decisions are tied to others in Canada and globally. Opportunities abound to remake our world: to reconceptualize individual troubles as public issues.

Living a life committed to public service embodies the values of your school, of Brock University. Brock's motto is *Surgite*, translated as push on. We hope that you take these two words with you in your travels: push on.

Celebrate your accomplishments today. Tomorrow you will have the opportunity to embark on living your life as an ACTOR, and with "great seriousness", using your education to enhance the lives of others. *SURGITE*.

References

1. Hikmet, Nazim, *On Living*, www.PoemHunter.com - the World's Poetry Archive.
2. Piaget, Jean. *Prospects: the quarterly review of comparative education*, XXIV (1/2): 311-327.