

ST JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

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GRADUATION ADDRESS

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LIVING IN THE LIGHT

As someone who has been involved in education and learning for just about all my life, I welcome this class of graduands to the gift of light which such pursuits not only offer but continuously celebrate. It could not have been otherwise coming out of St John's - a centre of excellence dedicated to "the pursuit of wisdom which flows from free inquiry, religious values, and human experience". Your being the excellent professionals that this great institution, like my own university of the West Indies, promises its graduates to be, demands of all who carry its letters and wear its gowns and hoods "an ability to analyse and articulate clearly what is, but also to develop the ethical and aesthetic values to imagine and help realise what might be".

Such is the challenge of living in the light not only for you but also for your family and friends, and, no less importantly, for a whole new

generation of young hopefuls who will bear the torch of a future that lies always with the intelligent. This is, indeed, a special future because it comes at end-of-century and rests firmly on the threshold of the Third Millennium. It comes at a time of one of the greatest periods of modern human history and existential experience; and it challenges us all to the vigorous and rigorous exercise of the creative imagination and the creative intellect, a form of action to which St. John's in its teaching, research and outreach activities is totally committed. We who are graduands should consider ourselves fortunate for having had the opportunity of engagement with this ancestral grove of higher learning.

We are now to be let out on a world that is ripe with contradictions. The complexity of complexity is the norm. But is all this cause for surrender or desperation? Certainly not! It is, instead, a glorious opportunity of "diffusing the dark", "cancelling the doubt", and providing "a shining antidote to the pain", as one great Jamaican poet poetically puts it. For as creatures of the passing half a millennium we have the ability to cope with such contradictions in the Americas

which have been tenanted for all of 500 years by millions of disparate souls whose sense and sensibility have been honed by the varied historic encounters between old civilisations on American soil. This is as true of the United States, and Canada, of Central and South America, as it is of Jamaica and the Caribbean from which I come.

We are all now at the end of an important phase of that awesome, challenging and exciting half a millennium when old dispensations have all but outlived their original purposes and people like ourselves are called upon to give new form and purpose to the age-long values of human dignity, cultural equity, freedom and democracy as the basis for governance in civil society.

I invite you, then, to come with your well earned certification on a journey of global intercultural learning and action in preparation of both self and society as well as of the next generation for safe entry into the Third Millennium and for meaningful existence in what will inescapably be a globalised 21st century. For therein lies the full grasp of the real worth of the cultural realities of different peoples who have forged in the crucible of their separate existence over time

the elements of language, kinship patterns, artistic manifestations, political and economic systems to suit their own purposes.

Coping with the dilemma of difference is what you are required to do and is certainly what we of the Americas can do in this global village which even while it gets smaller is holding on to the particularities of nation, tribe, or special interest group.

We in the Caribbean which forms one part of the Americas have long understood and grappled with the challenge of making sense of the noise, of synthesising the disparities of actual experience, transforming liabilities into assets, of creatively handling the chaos. Schizophrenia, they say, is not a matter of pathology for people where I live. Rather it is a source of energy for creative action.

I recommend this to our new graduands here today in the knowledge that all is possible from among you whose society has long been a microcosm of the wider world, and a forerunner in the exploration of new paths to truth and of new ways in using the light which history and contemporary life have

shed on us.

What we will have learnt from St John's and will continue to learn in our jobs and activities which constitute lifelong learning is that life is not a one-way street. Now that we have the light, we can see, as well as feel, the texture of human existence. We can decode, recode, construct and deconstruct, all at the same time. As one United States leader reputedly once said, we can chew gum and walk straight.

We all, however, have to ask ourselves with candour and without fear some pointed questions in making the journey. We must with courage and without faintheartedness release ourselves from Western man's bipolar perception of the world in terms of science versus art, civilised versus primitive, democracy versus dictatorship, black versus white, Christian versus Heathen, and so on. None of these arbitrary arenas of conflict speak as totally to global reality as is claimed.

How do we get this reality of global texture, diversity and plurality across to ourselves and the growing population of young people in the Americas? How, with the passing of Europe's

Quincentennial Celebrations, do we get the young to understand that the indigenous Amerindians on that Caribbean island discovered Columbus as much as he "discovered" them, and that it is a-historical to have history written from the point of view that sees beginnings in the American Hemisphere only from the day the Genoan Wanderer landed on these shores.

How do we hone the sensibility of young Americans and ourselves around to the idea that they belong to a great and marvellous experiment, bringing original and novel contributions to the total experience of humankind and changing the face of old Europe, of old Africa, and in turn of old China and old India? How do we come to terms with the fact that we are all more the creatures of relations than of origins? How do we bring to consciousness the fact that we of the Americas have been positive contributors to the "progress" of humankind in its industrial and science-and-technology revolutions and that none of this could have come about had it not been for the Great Experiment by people of diverse origins meeting and relating on American soil - whether North, South or the Caribbean? Have we the confidence to take a hold of this dimension of world history and

stake our claims as full-fledged members of the human race?

Intercultural learning, an understanding of the nature of the tapestry that is contemporary society and the fundamental belief in the primacy of the human being are the prescribed routes to this particular form of liberation.

The next generation must itself understand and appreciate that each part of the Americas is itself part of a wider family in a configuration of concentric circles, starting with one's own village or urban neighbourhood, extending into the nation with which one identifies, fanning out into a wider regional space (Latin America, the Caribbean, North America, Central America), stretching out into the Americas, not of 1492 but of 1992 and after, extending still further into wider worlds, but finally with all being part of the globalised economic octopus the world has become in the late 20th century. All of this requires a thorough understanding of, and a capability to deal with, the contradictions and complexities of the "modern" world of which the Americas (to some, the Caribbean especially) are a microcosm. It was John Locke who three

centuries ago after all declared that "In the beginning all the world was America". At the end of the millennium "all the world" seems still to be "America".

"America" here means the enduring underlying unity that informs humankind's opulent diversity and counteracts such divisive exclusivities as race, gender, creed, ethnicity, place of origin and cultural pedigree. From the old Roman Empire through the proselytizing thrust of Christianity and the excitement of the Golden Age of Spain when Europeans, Moors and the children of Abraham lived together in creative ferment, to the vigorous modernity of the United States and the decolonizing zeal of the post-War developing world, "e pluribus unum" - out of many one or unity in diversity - has fueled man's hope for perpetual peace and kept alive the resonance in our cry for mutual understanding.

The world is indeed "America" because the Americas in a very special sense have had the light. You our new graduands can now face the challenge because you are among those who now have the light. As Lorna Goodison, the Jamaican poet has said:

"We have the light
Only who gave it
can put it out
We have light
diffusing dark
cancelling doubt,
even when the point
of the poisoned sword
injects venom and dark
a light running
like mercury
through the veins
is a shining antidote
to pain.
King of Swords
You are no more
We have light
You see
We have light".
