

Seeking Greatness, Enabling Transformation

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Eminent Chancellor, Your Honour, Minister McGifford, Mr. Toews, distinguished guests, graduands, colleagues, and friends.

It is an honour to be named the eleventh President of the University of Manitoba. In particular, I am privileged to succeed President Eموke Szathmary whose commitment and contributions to this institution and its success set a high standard for me and for those who will come after me. It is also a pleasure to have President Arnold Naimark here today, and to recognize his shaping contributions to this University. I know that I follow many others who have made large contributions to the long and venerable history of this University, which has been an agent of transformation in the province of Manitoba for generations. Universities at their best are always agents of transformation for individuals and for communities. So with this position of President there comes a great responsibility to serve the University community and the province by extending the pattern of transformation that originates here, and I am honoured to be taking on that responsibility.

I come to the role with a desire to be part of a University reaching for greatness – for making the largest contribution it can make. I want us to determine together what it will take for the University of Manitoba to be perceived both by those of us inside the University and those outside the University as a great University. I want to identify specific contributions we might expect to make and specific results that we might expect to achieve by the time that I leave this position (in 5 to 10 years), by the time the children of our current students come to the campus (in 25 years) and by the time *their* children come (in 50 years). Then I want to work with you to accomplish these things.

I do not want us to be satisfied with reaching only for what has already been accomplished elsewhere. Nor do I think that others will be satisfied with that. We owe our students, who come to us with hopes and dreams for the lives ahead of them, the *best* that we can provide for them. We owe those who work in the institution, who have committed their talents to our common task, the *best* that we can provide for them. We owe the people of the province, who have trusted us with public resources, the *best* that we can provide for them. I want to be part of a transformative institution. I want to reach for greatness.

What will greatness comprise for the University of Manitoba in 5, 10, 25 or 50 years?

In his poem *The Hidden Life* the poet Joseph Bottum has written about finding something out of the ordinary, something transformative. He begins like this:

Sometimes on evening walks you hear,
in whispers from old wells
and almost-words that rivers speak,

a quiet voice that tells
of small, secluded things. Like murmured
prayers from churchmen's stalls
or what the marble echoes say,
it rises, then it falls.
And you may follow when it calls

or you may think to wait.

The speaker describes a quiet voice that communicates in whispers or the word-like sounds of running water, with cadences like those overheard when someone prays with indiscernible words or when echoes come along marble corridors. If we want to know more we can follow. But we can also wait in hope for more clarity, resist following this voice into unexpected places and thus fail to learn of secluded things. Following the voice will lead to transformation – but we are free to wait.

My coming to the University of Manitoba is the result of long following a quiet voice I have not always fully understood, and thus going to unexpected places. Universities are agents of transformation: this has certainly been true in my life.

I was the first person in my family to attend university. I did not know what to expect, and my parents were not able to provide any detailed guidance. But gradually a direction emerged – sciences narrowing to computer science, a bachelor's degree followed by graduate school, a period of study followed by an appointment as a faculty member. At each stage I seemed to be in places beyond my comprehension, always expecting to be exposed as one who did not fit in.

Early in my academic career I developed an interest in administrative work. This was accidental because like others I was attracted to the academic life by a love of my discipline and the possibility of passing that on to others, not by any intention to become involved in academic administration. But I discovered the sense of satisfaction that can come from providing the circumstances in which others can do the actual work of the university.

The quiet voice also led me to other places. I have been given a number of roles in universities, in the broader public sector and in the business world. These have all been learning experiences. I have met many people who have shaped my thinking, my intellectual interests and my career. There are too many to name, but a few stand out. The team I worked with in my first management role at Queen's University tempered my inexperience and enthusiasm with wisdom – and the occasional bit of sarcasm. I met one of my best friends, George Logan, through serving on a committee and have been shaped by his gentle but inexorable stretching of my intellectual horizons for the decades during which we have known each other. Members of the team with which I worked at the University of Regina responded supportively to almost all my ideas, not hesitating to point out what was impossible; we experienced a wonderful bonding. And in the many crossings of paths in a small community I met others, including Brian Johnson, Mark MacLeod and Mo Bundon, with whom I have schemed and dreamed, and from whom I have learned many things about leadership. Chris Krywulak gave me the opportunity to work with him in his company in the information technology sector, a return to my original focus, for several years.

In all of these places I have had interesting work and have formed friendships. I have met many humane and brilliant people, and have experienced things I did not know existed to be experienced.

In the time that I was away from the academy I began developing a relationship with my fiancée, Gursh, which has sparked a passion for life that is unexpectedly powerful and rich. This passion gives me a new and more energized perspective on my professional calling. Gursh, and our combined family of five children, the most perfect grandchild, our five brothers and our extended family, have become increasingly important to me.

And then I heard the quiet voice again, followed when that voice called, met new friends during the recruitment process, became energized by the possibilities at the University of Manitoba, and was given the opportunity to become the eleventh president, and to be here today.

My life has been transformed because of my experience at universities – studying at Toronto and UBC, working at Queen’s, Regina and now Manitoba.

The second part of Bottum’s poem is this:

The green
at dusk seems deeper than
the green at dawn. Beyond the gate
a garden opens on
long shadows overgrown
with leaves and lilac nunneries,
between the gravel paths, where sparrows
seek their tenebraes.¹
And you may follow, if you please,

or keep to public streets.

The speaker now describes an image of what the quiet voice may be calling the listener to experience. At the end of the day a garden full of shadows and plants that are overgrowing and, indeed, casting the shadows. There are paths, where birds seek release from the cycle of pain and darkness. Whatever the quiet voice offers is not without darkness, stress, suffering, pain – but also, by intimation, eventual overcoming of these things. The quiet voice, in fact, continues to offer transformation.

Universities are agents of transformation for members of the university community.

In particular, universities are agents of transformation for those who come as students, opening up possibilities to them and preparing them for a rich experience of cultural, social and economic life.

¹ The name given to matins and lauds of the following day, usually sung in the afternoon or evening of Wednesday, Thursday or Friday of Holy Week, at which the candles lighted at the beginning of the service are extinguished one by one after each psalm, in memory of the darkness at the time of the crucifixion. [Oxford English Dictionary]

Li Ka Shing, the Chancellor of Shantou University, one of the University of Manitoba's international partners, recently said this:

A life of wisdom is a life of reason, blind ignorance is our only true enemy. That is why education is so important. It is not merely a degree or a certificate to a better life, it should provide us with the tools to navigate our life, it should be a journey of discovery and self-discovery, [with] your professional and linguistic skills, your creative and critical mind, all intertwined to help you to achieve and to serve with passion and a balanced mind. It is for this reason that education is the cornerstone of tradition and progression, of dignity and wisdom and our tools to shape destiny. This is what education promises.²

This is the vision that motivates those who serve in the academy. We are looking both to preserve tradition *and* to make progress, to find in ourselves – and to instill in our students – dignity and wisdom, and thus to shape destiny. This is not an easy task and it is not for the faint of heart. Passing on information is easy, but true education is not easy.

All of us who have been students, especially those of you receiving your degrees today, having had lives transformed by the university experience, need to become agents of transformation too. It is easy to speak of the university as an abstraction, but the concrete reality is found in people. You need to take what you have learned, both in formal settings and in the interaction with friends and colleagues, and use that knowledge and wisdom to become agents of transformation in your family, in your circle of friends, in your working environment and in the larger community. This pattern of transformation is a pattern that is meant to be repeated. The world will be transformed and reshaped by what you will do in concert with others transformed as you have been transformed. Those of us who have preceded you place great hope in the contributions you will make.

Universities can also be agents of transformation for those who work as faculty or as staff members.

We value collegiality as the basis for our collective experience in the academy. The University of Manitoba can be an example of effective collegial behavior. By this I mean that we should use processes that are inclusive and consultative – but we should not be satisfied with that bare minimum. We should also strive to be an outstandingly attractive place to work, a place where each person is treated with respect and dignity, and given the largest possible opportunity to make a rewarding contribution. Of course, we must behave collegially, showing respect to others and their views. Having said that, we should be committed to using collegial and consultative processes deliberately and with dispatch because there are many needs to be addressed in our community and our world, and these needs are pressing.

Universities have traditionally been the places in democratic societies where there is most freedom for the expression of radical views, and we should continue to serve that role, even when it is not comfortable.

Such collegiality – civil behavior, broad debate, the generation of results – is also not easy and not for the faint of heart.

² Li Ka Shing, What Does Education Promise?, from Reform Is In the Details, Shantou University, Annual Report, 2007.

More importantly, perhaps, you who are members of the faculty or members of the staff at the University of Manitoba will be those who actually carry out the transformative work of the University. Presidents at best facilitate this work, we do not do it. Whether you are involved in the University's primary missions of teaching, research and public service, or serve in roles providing the organizational infrastructure for those directly involved, it is your efforts that will determine whether the University of Manitoba is a great university, or whether it is less than that. Great things *can* happen as we work together, but only if *you* make them happen.

What will greatness comprise for the University of Manitoba? It should certainly include being an agent of transformation in the lives of our students; we must give them an outstanding preparation for the rest of their lives, lives of transformation in society. Greatness for the University of Manitoba should also include being an exemplary employer, allowing the transformation of growth and development to continue in our faculty and staff colleagues. Greatness for the University of Manitoba will depend upon having an outstanding group of highly committed faculty and staff, so that results can arise from the contributions that these colleagues make.

Bottum's poem continues with these lines:

Against
the bruit of the busy day,
the private houses close their eyes.
A few small panes betray
high bookshelves in a firelit room,
a woman sweeping floors,
a glimpse of some unknowing boy
at work at evening chores.
And you may follow, through those doors,

or you may turn aside.

The speaker's next image is of houses, with most curtains drawn as evening approaches, but some glimpses to be seen – bookshelves, a fire, and people doing daily chores. These houses are private places, but something of value and interest is happening inside them and the listener is encouraged to enter. The experience to which the quiet voice calls the listener is not a solitary experience, it is an experience in a community of others who have already listened.

Universities are agents of transformation in the communities that surround them.

In his popular books Richard Florida identifies *Talent*, *Technology* and *Tolerance* as defining aspects of growing regions. He notes the key role universities play in each of these – attracting talented faculty, staff and students to the community, generating ideas about the arts, the sciences and technology that spin out into the local economy primarily through educated students, but also through consulting by faculty and the creation of new enterprises, and creating a progressive, open and tolerant climate. In short, he says, "universities help to establish the broader quality of place of the communities in which they are located."³

³ Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class: And How it's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*, New York: Basic Books, 2002, p.292.

This is certainly true for the University of Manitoba. For 130 years the people of Manitoba have looked to the University for transformative contributions to the province. And as I have begun to know this community I have been told repeatedly by graduates, by members of the University itself, by external partners, by citizens in the community and by members of government that this University is a critically important contributor to the province. This is the province's research intensive university, its medical/doctoral university, its engine of innovation. What has been accomplished at the University of Manitoba is wonderful, and a source of justifiable pride.

What will greatness comprise for the University of Manitoba? Greatness will include strengthening its linkages with the community, and increasing its impact on the province's economic, cultural and social development.

Bottum's poem concludes like this:

In lines
of black between the flames,
a fire writes against its light.
Dry hopes, forgotten fames,
the traceless works of childless men:
All printed there to read.
The cinders spell the deeper night,
Dark need inside dark need.
And you may follow where they lead

or you may look away.

In this final picture the speaker looks more deeply into the fire previously seen, and perceives meaning in the interplay of light and shadow within the fire. That interplay reveals serious matters: hopes that have little chance of being fulfilled, significance fading away, and individual lives leaving no trace. There is "dark need inside dark need," yet an expectation that the listener, who is called to face the need, can become part of the transformation that makes significance in the midst of need.

In a world that faces food shortages, environmental crises, economic uncertainty, inequity of opportunity, disparities in health outcomes and the quality of life, poverty, religiously motivated strife and too great a readiness to address differences through armed conflicts, there is a pressing need for us to be even more engaged with the realities that face this province, this country and the world. As a society we need to move quickly to develop responses and to deploy them, and the University of Manitoba can play a leading role.

T.S. Eliot has said, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go." So let us commit ourselves to finding out how far we can go together, to reaching for greatness at the University of Manitoba as we enhance our capacity to make transformative contributions to individual lives and to the community.

If we commit together to listening to the quiet, whispering voice, and to looking for the rich and fulfilled life, for the life that is not available to those who will only keep to comfortable and well-trodden paths, I do not know precisely where our search will take us. We will be transformed and we will help others be transformed. We will see need and we will have the opportunity to address it, but I do not know precisely what the need will be or how we will be called to face it. I *am* confident, though, that there is a deep meaning and a deep joy to be found in this pursuit. There is an excitement associated with such a project. Perhaps the search we share will create a feeling of excitement that is something like this.

[University of Manitoba Singers perform “Adiemus”]