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Chancellor, President, Dean, Principal, Professors. And most important: Graduates and your parents.

It is a great honour to receive this Doctor of Laws from York University. Thank you. And above all, many thanks to all of you graduating today for allowing me to join you in your celebration. Of course, you had to work for your degrees. Very hard. For years. Most often with the determined support of your parents. Many of you are the children of immigrants. For them, your graduation today is a powerful declaration of their place here, their success as engaged Canadian citizens.

Here's the thing. We are the best educated society in the history of the world. The Western world in general, but Canada in particular. Here we have gradually evolved from a small, educated elite to the conviction that everyone has to have a serious education.

Societies evolve in many ways. Let me say something about our evolution and its effect on you. Most of the jobs your degree will give you access to are equivalent to jobs Canadians could have in 1900 - 125 years ago - with a high school degree. I know this sounds strange. What they used to get with Grade 12 now requires a B.A. That's OK - what we do today is more complicated. And your education has been much more complicated.

But what are the implications? A century or so ago it cost money to go to public school - especially to finish high school. Eventually we made the completing of high school free. No tuition! Why? Well, those who preceded us had the idea of a more or less egalitarian, democratic society.

What am I saying? If a B.A. today gives you what Grade 12 got you in 1900, well then today an undergraduate education should be tuition free.

Education is not supposed to be a way for provincial governments to make money. Or to complain about its costs. Education and democracy are part of the same sentence.

Stephen Leacock, still our most famous comic writer - and a not so interesting professor of economics at McGill - believed that the core of any good university was the bar. Not the legal kind of bar. He wasn't alone.

Others believe it's the library. Now it's the internet - A.I. in particular. The use of these technologies seems to remove the need for libraries. For books.

Forgive me, I have 7,000 books. Of course I haven't read all 7,000 - but I've looked things up in them all. I think of my library as my back-up brain. The books are filled with turned-down page corners, Post-its and my complex cross-referencing system. I underline, circle, scribble notes and comments all over the margins - some rude, some questioning.

Hard to do online! Is this an efficient system? Absolutely not. It's a nightmare.

All the same, with it, I've produced 15 books, put out ideas, knocked down some established truths - turns out they weren't true - annoyed lots of experts and perhaps helped the public debate. That's what a writer like me is supposed to do.

But today there is an atmosphere out there - including in universities - that if we are serious we should all keep our heads down - be careful - be intellectually polite!

In truth, that is how societies and civilizations come to a halt, lose their way, and begin to collapse.

Their energy drains away. The energy to create, to improve wellbeing, to stand up to bullies - individual bullies or authoritarian regimes. Bullies who are driven by self-interest or pointless ambitions. If we're not careful, we can lose the energy to take risks with our own reputation and career - and sometimes our life.

When I published my first novel - a very political novel - a half-century ago in French in Paris, there was a violent reaction from the establishment right-wing press - insults, dismissive articles. I was upset, embarrassed. Writing it had been such an effort and here I was, 29, my life seemed to be on the line, being ridiculed publicly for hundreds of thousands of readers to see. I slept badly for a few nights, then woke up one morning realizing their attacks had been a great gift.

I had been a nobody. The attacks from major newspapers made me a somebody - a respectable writer. Well, maybe not respectable. A combative writer. Then other writers came to my defence. My skin thickened. My life as a writer started. Writers need thick skins. I can't give you much advice, expect that if you are interested in a creative life, you will need a thick skin.

That's what public life can be like. You don't have to want it. Lots of people would prefer a private life, a quieter existence. And that's good too. The trick is to work out who you are and what you want - and then figure out how to live that life.

I say all of this because you are graduating into tough times. My guess is that things will get tougher. More uncertain, unstable. Not just in Toronto or Canada. This is an era of great uncertainty. The democracies - our world - represent a very small part of the world's population.

There is no question that authoritarianism is on the rise. Everywhere, including here, it is tied to arguments of efficiency, of getting on with things. Of getting things done.

This is the tail end of the globalization ideology, which was never about internationalism or trade. And was always about undermining the power of citizens and the public good.

It is true that democracy and responsible individualism and engaged citizenship take a lot of time. Authoritarian regimes always claim to be efficient - to deliver! Speed is their thing.

That was Mussolini's central argument in the creation of modern fascism. It still is the argument against democracy, which we hear every day from neoconservatives - who aren't conservative at all but just old-style right-wing. Mussolini would have loved them.

What could be slower than a society which takes the time to have citizens involved in the process of governance - a society which at its best listens to and acts on the opinions of non-experts - us - citizens. In fact, we need to go even slower. We need more participation. More listening. Much more participation, Much more speaking up and listening from all of us.

Over the last 75 years we have seen a remarkable rise in expertise - and that's good. If needed, I want my heart operated on by a heart surgeon - not a writer.

But the rise of expertise and efficiency is not something that should shape or direct our society. The citizenry - all of us - you - through our democracy - have to do the shaping.

This is complicated. It does need time. Take the example of A.I. It is brand new. Very interesting. But there is a growing suggestion that, as a result of A.I., we will no longer be able to shape our future. This sort of panic is a typical response to all new technologies and structural ideologies. And unpleasant people will try to use this panic as an opportunity for a power grab. This has been true from early in the industrial revolution, but particularly since 1945.

Let me put it this way. We thought up A.I. We did the research. We put the mechanisms in place. We created the content it can work with.

Then suddenly we worry it will take over. Suddenly technocrats and technicians start saying we are no longer going to be in charge.

This makes no sense.

My guess is that within a decade we - you - will come up with whole new concepts which will overpower A.I. and make it passé. That's just a guess from a writer. But one of my specialties is guessing.

In any case, all of this will be in your hands, not mine, not your professors'.

I feel, I intuit, that you will do the job. It will be tough.

Tough means exciting. After all, there is nothing worse than a boring life. What could be worse than waking up aged 50, bored out of your mind, feeling you have wasted half your life.

You have the good luck to have been born into an era when democracy will be increasingly threatened. And passive worshippers of technology will discourage humanist interventions - as they have increasingly over the last half century.

It's going to be hard work to fight them off. Hard work to rebuild the reality of the engaged citizen who believes in the shared public good. Hard work to build new coalitions of engaged citizens. Very tough. Very hard work.

In other words - exciting times. Demanding lives. High risk.

I envy you.