

Honorary Degree: June 2024

Chancellor, Mr. President, Honoured Guests, Family and Friends. I am grateful to be here at this centre of excellence.

Ontario Tech is home to research institutes dealing with the issues of tomorrow: from software to clean energy and soon, cybercrime. Thanks to Chancellor Frazer and his wife Leslie, the university also has a new Centre for Digital Innovation in Education to develop and implement responsive strategies to enhance equitable education, digital wellness, global competencies and innovation in education.

I am very happy to be here with all of you and am astonished and delighted to receive this honour.

This is a day to celebrate and have fun. A day to recognize your many years of hard work.

Car vous êtes maintenant diplômés!!

MILESTONE

You have reached an important milestone and should be proud of what you have accomplished. You should also remember the sacrifices of others who have helped you along the way: the friend who was a shoulder to lean on, the mentor who gave you an opportunity to learn, the teacher who guided you through challenges, and the family that's been there in good times and in bad.

This is a day to share the joy of your success with them and to thank them.

BEGINNING OF GREAT JOURNEY

But this is also a time to look forward. Because completing your degree is not an end; it is the beginning of your journey to become leaders in our community, a community where all are welcome and can thrive.

This is both a challenge and an opportunity.

How can you make the best of both these challenges and opportunities?

With the help of others I have learned much in my life and career as a lawyer and judge.

So let me share some thoughts that may help you answer this question for yourselves.

UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

I grew up in a largely homogeneous community and had a deep sense of belonging: to my community, and to Canada.

And then I moved to France. I knew no one and no one knew me. I could neither understand nor speak French. When I first walked into my classroom, I was acutely aware of how it felt not to understand, not to be understood, and not to belong. But I learned more than the French language: I was exposed to a different culture and a different way of doing things.

I also explored the world of music which taught me the art of communicating something powerful; something that often cannot be captured in words.

With time, I realized what a wonderful thing it is to move beyond the confines of my own experiences and went on to live and study in Italy, Tunisia, and the Netherlands.

I learned the importance of understanding others because, as my mother-in-law once said to me, we are all citizens of the world.

It is important to build a community where all feel welcome. The philosopher Charles Taylor has warned about how we are shaped by how people see us. Of the destructive results of a society that projects a confining or demeaning image onto its members. And of the fact that people must believe they will not only be tolerated but be understood.

My experience practising law and more recently as a judge has brought home to me the importance of understanding difference, while working within the structures and rules governing all members of our community.

I have watched witnesses recount difficult moments, challenging moments, sometimes unfathomably sad moments. People who come from all walks of life, from different cultures, different religions, and sometimes different languages. They told stories I will never forget. They are the context within which our legal questions about fairness, truth and trust in our justice system arise.

The law raises important questions about how to apply rules that are embedded in cultures and traditions. Of how to assess the reliability and credibility of witnesses while considering language, culture and other barriers. And how and why governments make decisions that affect people's important Charter rights like equality, freedom of association, and freedom of expression.

Behaviour is often examined through the prism of what a reasonable person would do, or what constitutes a reasonable limit in a free and democratic society. We are still very much in the process of understanding what aspects of specific cultures we should build into the reasonable person.

Understanding our differences is rendered more challenging as we are rapidly reshaping our tools and, in some ways, our tools are shaping us. Readers are hungry for quick answers and as *one blogger said*, social media "is a great place to tell the world what you're thinking before you've had a chance to think about it."

What I also realized was that under the rule of law, the most emotionally charged, difficult decisions are addressed in a place where order and civility must prevail. This is the means by which we can understand and preserve those fragile and complex institutions upon which our community, Canada, is built.

As graduates and future leaders, you will play an important role in building our strong sense of community.

With the increasing diversity of our people, the exploration of reconciliation with our indigenous peoples, the many new customs, cultures and languages we bring to the Canada of today, it is all the more important to listen, really listen, to those whose views differ from our own.

So look past your own experiences and try to deepen your understanding of the world of others. Question some of the views and beliefs you may have taken for granted, and respect views that may differ from your own, so that together we can foster excellence.

Remember too the important things we have achieved together, and the fragility and complexity of our community and the institutions upon which they are built.

Because the most important battle we face in Canada today in building our community is the battle for facts, truth, and trust in one another, and our institutions. Because truth is premised on facts not opinions, no matter how loudly they are voiced.

We need facts to reach the truth. We need truth to build trust. And we need trust to maintain and grow our shared sense of community and our shared pursuit of excellence.

Graduates, your role is to make the most of these challenges and opportunities. And if you do, you will have good lives, while helping to build an even better country for all. I put my faith in you! Congratulations and bon courage.