

UNIVERSITY OF WESTERN ONTARIO SPRING CONVOCATION

President Robert C. Dynes

June 9, 2004

London, Ontario, Canada

President Dynes delivered these remarks upon receiving an honorary doctorate from his alma mater.

Thank you. It is a tremendous pleasure to be back in London, and it is with great pride that I accept this honor today.

I'd like to thank the Senate, President Davenport, and the entire Western community for selecting me as a recipient of this honorary degree. I thought it was great to receive my first degree from Western, but the second is even better.

Being here today also gives me an opportunity to thank this university for everything it has given to me over the years. This is the place that set me on an entirely new path in life. It's the place that sparked my lifelong love affair with physics. And it is a place that, still today, connects me to my own history.

I grew up only a few miles from here – about a bike ride away. Long before I enrolled at Western, the campus was part of my life. As a kid I swam in the pool here; I played in the playing fields and on the hockey rinks; I went tobogganing on the hills. And I spent a lot of hours in the library.

Somewhere along the line, my boyhood sports aspirations yielded to a realistic understanding that college was in my future. And there was never any doubt in my family about what “college” would mean – it meant Western.

In thinking about this honor today, I realized that this year is the 40th anniversary of my graduation from this university. And I still recall with great vividness many of the details of my time here: Walking across the bridge in the middle of winter – freezing. The purple beanies we wore our first week as freshmen, with a “W” emblazoned across the front. And time spent at our favorite watering holes, “The Ceeps” and the Oxford House.

More importantly, I recall what this university did for my own development as a scholar and as a scientist.

When I came to Western, I was a 17-year-old kid on a scholarship from the London Life Insurance Company. It was my junior year that I discovered physics – and it truly was love at first sight.

I remember setting up an experiment in the halls of the physics building to measure the velocity of light. My labmate and I performed the experiment in the evening, when there were fewer

people walking up and down the halls. I remember how thrilled I was to get an answer that was not too far from the right answer. Here was an experiment that had won a Nobel Prize years earlier – and I had done it! I was hooked on physics.

Being part of the physics department was like being part of a family. There were about 12 students in our class at the time, faculty offices were always open, and the members of the faculty always were willing to talk with us. It was a very friendly place.

My senior year, the department chair called me into his office and said, “You really should go to graduate school.” I really didn’t have the faintest clue what that meant or what it involved. But it was an opportunity to continue exploring physics, so of course I agreed.

I went home to tell my mom I was going to grad school, and she was deeply, deeply disappointed. She didn’t understand why I wouldn’t go out and get a “real” job.

I’m sure some of the parents in the audience today can relate to that.

But I never regretted my decision. After graduate school I went on to a research career with AT&T Bell Labs; to the faculty and then the chancellor’s office of the University of California, San Diego; and most recently to the president’s office of the University of California system.

I gave up the tobogganing – there isn’t much in California – but I got a life full of exciting challenges and new opportunities. And it all started right here.

As I was thinking about this event today and the 40 years that have passed since my last convocation ceremony here, I reflected on some of the other things that have changed. I’d like to share one of them with you.

Growing up here in London, at least in the period I did, one tended to have a fairly structured view of the world. That view included the sense that there was a guiding “master plan” to most things and that wise, educated, benevolent people were implementing that plan.

You know who I mean. We refer to them as “they.” As in: What are “they” thinking; or, “they” will do the right thing.

“They,” these people, were out there in the world, in our institutions, watching over us, guiding society with their inherent wisdom, and making sure the right decisions were made.

People like university presidents, for instance.

As I grew older and took on positions of increasing responsibility myself, I began to reconsider this worldview. It increasingly occurred to me that I was becoming one of “them” – one of these people who, by virtue of their position, are assumed to be infinitely wise ... assumed to be the people who will make everything go right in the end.

And I realized, by trying to apply this definition to myself, that this was entirely wrong.

I realized that there is no “they.” There is only “us.” And things can and do go wrong if we are not paying attention.

Decision making that is wise, that is moral, that is socially responsible, and that is compassionate does not rest in the hands of a select few. It is the obligation of all of us who live in civil society. *We* are responsible for our own destiny, and the words and actions of individuals at all places in society play an important role in the shaping of that destiny.

This may be a burdensome thought in some ways, considering the responsibility it conveys upon all of us as individuals. But it should also be a liberating thought.

As all of you who are graduating today go out into the world, you don’t have to break into “they” to make a difference. There is no “they”! If you choose to, you can have more influence in this world than you ever believed possible if you have a restless mind, a committed heart, an openness to new ideas, and a reservoir of courage.

So, to my fellow degree recipients today, congratulations. May you leave your mark on this world, and may it benefit us all.

And to Western, the place where my future and so many other futures have begun, thank you, from the bottom of my heart.