

FHE PRIZE-GIVING 25 OCT 2012

Feature Address by Professor Bridget Brereton

It's an honour to have been asked to speak to our prize-winning students and graduates this year, which I deeply appreciate; and I speak as an insider, a member of the Humanities family for many years—I won't tell you how many. The theme of this year's ceremony is responsibility and independence, and the featured quotation—which I've slightly changed to reflect more gender-inclusive language—is "You cannot build character and courage by taking away a person's initiative and independence". No, you cannot; but nor can you take away a person's initiative and independence if that person truly values them, and understands what they mean.

Now, this is really a bit of a cliché—but the thing about clichés is that they tend to be true, like Shakespeare's plays which are also full of clichés—but I do believe that we are all responsible for our lives and our choices. (We're not responsible for our parents' or ancestors' sins though we should be aware of them). We are equally responsible for others: family, neighbours, class mates, friends, the wider society, the less fortunate among us. We have responsibilities as citizens and members of political communities, nations, some of them celebrating 50 years of Independence.

What should responsibility and independence mean to us? In my own understanding: independence of thought and character, and responsibility to exercise an enquiring mind. I would like to link these meanings to our special mission in this Faculty, to the humanities. I would like to argue that our Faculty has a special role to play in developing those qualities of mind and character.

Some years ago the University set up an Institute for Critical Thinking. Many of us in this Faculty, while intrigued by this development, said to ourselves that encouraging critical thinking is what we'd been doing all along. In all our class discussions, lectures, assignments and so on, hadn't we and our students been engaged in critical enquiry, independent thinking—whether the subject matter was literature, languages, history, the arts, pedagogy or whatever? Maybe we didn't always succeed, but the development of an independent cast of mind has always been seen as a key reason for studying the humanities.

In the Western tradition, the humanities were, historically, the core of the old project of a “liberal education”. The idea that they should be the centre of a liberal or general education isn’t widely accepted today—since we live in a world where science and technology are the main drivers of economic change and advancing material prosperity, for most parts of the globe including our corner. To claim a civilizing or humanizing mission for the humanities is delicate: It seems to imply an elitist view of education, and the whole notion of “civilizing” has some heavy resonances. In this part of the world, it meant historically the colonial project of civilizing natives, of eradicating or despising non-Western, non-Christian cultures. Yet, if we can separate the idea from the historical backstory, as it were, and make the notion of “civilizing” truly universal, respectful of all peoples and their cultures—it may still be a valid mission for the humanities.

Can anyone deny that we *need* to be civilized or humanized, that we *need* more civility and humanity in our lives, public and private? Not if we read the papers, watch the TV news, listen to the radio talk shows, engage with the blogosphere. Not if we listen to and read the increasingly strident, often coarse, sometimes downright “ignorant” tone of our public discourse in all the proliferating media. We need to understand ourselves better and have a sounder sense of our achievements *and* our limitations and failures, both inevitably the product of our history. We need to know what we’ve come out of and survived; what’s to be remembered, maybe painfully, maybe in silence rather than strident cross-talk; what’s to be celebrated, joyfully and out loud. These kinds of knowledge may, over the longer term, help us to live better in our small, fractured, history-ridden societies.

In fact, they may help us to develop the independence of mind and habit of critical yet responsible thought that I proposed were the hallmarks of responsibility and independence, the theme of this ceremony. The humanities can help develop these characteristics by celebrating our achievements and by giving a longer-term, more balanced, better informed perspective to our thinking.

The humanities celebrate achievements: Studying our remarkable regional literatures, in French, Spanish and various Creoles as well as in English, helps us to grasp our potential as people who have contributed to world literature out of all proportion to our population size. Perhaps no other part of the former colonial world has given so much to the ongoing project often labeled “The Empire Writes Back”. This knowledge should help to counter the negativity and pessimism which

is sometimes the response to apparent failures in other areas of national or regional life.

Similarly with our languages, which are not always recognized for what they are, one of the most important and interesting human achievements to come out of the Caribbean. Our writers have transformed the various Englishes of the region, and so have the people whenever they open their mouths. All the different Creoles and their varied uses, in written and oral literature and in everyday speech acts, which we study and teach in this Faculty, reflect our history of intense creativity by ordinary people as well as gifted writers and performers. Of course, the role of the performing and visual arts in our regional civilization is so obvious as to need no further argument, and our DCFA is one of the great success stories of our Faculty and indeed our Campus.

My own discipline is history, and I think we'd all agree that we can never achieve a deeper understanding of our society without some sense of its past. A historical perspective is immensely valuable in developing a responsible and independent mindset. Take for example our public discourse on race relations: We need to know what lies behind it, the history of race relations in a colonial and postcolonial society, the evolution of stereotypes and misconceptions, based on mutual ignorance, and on the colonial divide and rule policy, the damaging baggage derived both from ancestral ideas and prejudices as well as on lived experience in the national space. We need a historical perspective to encourage a longer-term, more balanced take on our current debates and dramas—historical rather than hysterical, as is so often the case these days.

I do believe that the study of all these disciplines, and more—I don't have the time to mention all the subjects or areas we teach and research in the Faculty—all help to develop a responsible, enquiring, critical and independent mode of thought. For me, that's what responsibility and independence should mean at the level of the individual.

Critical doesn't mean negative or cynical. Cynicism is hard to avoid at times, especially for older people like me, but you young graduates and students shouldn't fall into it, because it's ultimately a sterile mindset. Far from being cynical, your study of the many achievements of humanity, in this corner of the world and universally, should make you hopeful. Not starry-eyed, but hopeful in a

clear-eyed sort of way. And independent doesn't mean aloof or disengaged. The nation and region need you to become engaged and to participate in the wider society, in whatever ways you are able or want to do so. This is part of the responsibility which is the twin to independence of mind.

Yes, we must all emancipate ourselves—you know the rest of the line. Yes, none but ourselves can do it. But your training in the humanities should have equipped you to develop, over the rest of your lives, the qualities of responsibility and independence. There couldn't be a better gift to our nation as it enters its next 50 years of independent existence.

Let me conclude by congratulating all our prize-winners and First Class degree holders. You are our stars, we are very proud of you, and we have high hopes for what you will do as you enter the world outside the University—acknowledging that many of you have been fully engaged in that world long before you came here to study. Thank you to the parents, spouses, siblings, partners and friends who supported you along your journey to these prizes and awards. Continue to cherish these responsible and independent persons whom you—and we here in the Faculty—have helped to create.