



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY

**Chancellor Anne Giardini, Q.C.
Convocation Address Spring, 2016**

One of the most admirable attributes of a well-educated mind is the ability to hold two or more contradictory but useful thoughts in mind at the same time without feeling seasick. One of my favourite recent examples is a phrase that describes what today's graduands might be feeling today – both panic and zeal. You might very well be feeling anxiety about the wide-open world that lies ahead, while at the same time thinking “bring it on.” Meanwhile, your friends and supporters are very likely going through a version of this too, but their version is pride and worry. Panic and zeal. Pride and worry. We can be or feel or experience more than one thing at a time. So, with the idea of contradictions in mind, I'd like to talk for a few moments about roots.

Roots are what we are celebrating when we honour the 50th anniversary of Simon Fraser University. Fifty years ago, the tiny seedling that has grown into this remarkable institution was shaken out of its sheltering pot and pushed into the rocky but welcoming soil here on Burnaby Mountain. Like many seedlings, it was then as much root as tree. But it was alive with potential and, like a tree, over the past fifty years, the seedling that was SFU has grown. Grown into what we can see all around us, as well as campuses in downtown Vancouver and in Surrey. What we can't see has grown as well – SFU's deep and spreading roots into the community of people, ideas and action, with partnerships, projects, students, enterprises, scholars and alumni all over the world.

Here's the contradiction, the two contradictory thoughts I wish for you. In your time here, you have put down your own roots at SFU. The roots you have established will endure for the rest of your life. They will anchor you in the years ahead. They will help you absorb and respond to all kinds of changes, setbacks, storms, and opportunities. They will make you stronger and more resilient. As of today, they are a part of who you are, just as you are now part of this institution. But your SFU roots are not the kind that keeps you fixed in one place. They do not hold you back. They do not limit who you are or what you become. You are rooted but you are also unconfined.

In cities and wilderness, roots are immensely powerful. They break through rock, concrete, pavement and brick walls. They bend and snap iron fences. They buckle roads and sidewalk. They infiltrate tunnels, pipes, embankments and bridges. They are on a mission. Their relentlessness is often beautiful. All over Vancouver there are roads and paths and fences that go around a well-rooted tree, rather than interfere with its glorious spread.

One of my favourite writers, the American nature writer Annie Dillard, has written eloquently about the power of roots. She wrote: “... experimenters studied a single grass plant, winter rye. They let it grow in a greenhouse for four months; then they gingerly spirited away the soil—under microscopes, I imagine—and counted and measured all the roots and root hairs. In four months the plant had set forth 378 miles of roots—that's about three miles a day—in 14 million distinct roots. ... Other plants use water power to heave the rock

earth around as though they were merely shrugging off a silken cape. Rutherford Platt tells about a larch tree whose root had cleft a one-and-a-half-ton boulder and hoisted it a foot into the air. Everyone knows how a sycamore root will buckle a sidewalk, a mushroom will shatter a cement basement floor.

So my hope for you is an internal contradiction, but a useful one. I want you to retain always the power and force of your SFU roots and with them break barriers. And I want your travels and pursuits to be unconfined – limitless, various and interesting.

Thank you. And congratulations to you all.