



SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY
SPRING CONVOCATION
June 12, 13, 14 and 15, 2018

Convocation Address
By Dr. Ashok Khosla

The degree of Doctor of Laws, honoris causa, was conferred on Dr. Ashok Khosla during the Faculty Arts and Social Sciences ceremony on Thursday, June 14, 2018. The following is Dr. Khosla's Convocation address:

Chancellor Anne Giardini, President Andrew Petter, distinguished teachers, proud and (no doubt) relieved parents, and most important, all of you, and indeed all of us, whose life learning is only just beginning.

I feel deeply privileged to be invited here at the convocation ceremony of a university whose central purpose and commitment is not just to acknowledge an excellence which, after all, is the job of every university, but equally to ground-level praxis and relevance which are commodities that are very rare in the academic world.

50 years ago, when I was a student, we used to dream of what is called a reflective practitioner. A professional who not only had skills—engineering, law, medical, whatever—but also had the ethics and the morality of a good human being. Reflective practitioners were far and few in between and universities were beginning to realize that something needed to be done about that. 50 years later, we haven't improved very much but this particular campus, this university is certainly at the leading edge of making that dream come true.

But engaging the world, like nostalgia, is not what it used to be. It takes a lot more courage today and a lot more insight than it ever did before. The successive industrial and institutional revolutions that have taken place over the last three hundred years have improved the lives—the health, the longevity and fulfillment—of so many human lives, seem also to have improved the lives of our children, particularly the

With each day that passes, our world faces rapid and ever-accelerating change, which President Petter also referred to a few minutes ago. We face domineering machines, we have to deal with voodoo economics and a bewildering runaway complexity in our world. As we gasp for fresh air and clean water, while we drown in a sea of wastes, we push nature and society to their limits. In some cases, we've even transgressed those limits. Irreversibly. Life-threatening consequences are what we face right now.

I'm not here to tell you about doomsday. The reason I am here is to say that this can be prevented, but unless we move fast and unless we move now, the generations that follow us will pay very heavy costs.

Rise in the level and in the acidity of oceans; extinction of species—we're now in the middle of the sixth mass-extinction ; 109 (attakT(a)8.[ar]-18.2 (8)0.1 n 2.53(o)8]5oo5138-5 amo]a1.et -o'0-3 2[(3.08.9

With speed and scale, two goals that unfortunately still remain elusive in most areas in our life and world, how can the virus that so dramatically infected the spread of mobile phones be genetically engineered to do the same for eliminating hunger, poverty and extreme deprivation?

The second driver for me at the time when I was growing up out of college and into the real world of work was to acquire the skills that I would need to make the kind of contribution that would make a difference. Given the complexity and the speed of change that President Petter referred to, obviously one major part of it was adaptation. Every day, things were changing so rapidly that if you didn't adapt, in a Darwinian sense, you were going to be at a disadvantage. But in part, I must go beyond what President Petter said. It's not simply a matter of adaptation anymore. It's a matter of fashioning, creating the kind of future that we need also. So while you're adapting to changes beyond your control, you need to bring within your control the changes that you want to see for the future. And that is much harder.

I basically came to the conclusion way back in the sixties that what we most needed was systems thinking. Clear, logical thinking, which is the basis of any good decision making.

Unfortunately, systems thinking wasn't taught in normal academic courses. So I chose to study the physical sciences, which were a close cousin, and which I found personally very deeply satisfying and rewarding, but also as a surrogate for understanding how the world works.

And the third driver that was a deep concern for me was legacy. What is the legacy that our generation will leave to the future ones that follow us in terms of the strength and the resilience of our social systems, social institutions, the health and productivity of our natural systems and the wealth and equitable distribution of our huge economic assets that we've built up?

Over the decades, I have been fortunate to have had supporters and coworkers with whom we were able to make a small difference in these domains.

I very much hope that you will all be as fortunate, if not more so, because we desperately need those changes. Only then can we expect a more sustainable future for all our fellow citizens on this beautiful, life-filled, but also fragile planet which we call our collective home.

Madam Chancellor, having missed all four convocations of my own formal degrees, I particularly want to thank you as well for giving me this opportunity to finally receive a degree of my own. Thank you.