

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

**Convocation Address**  
**By Dr. Crystal Pite**

Madam Chancellor, Mr. President, senate, faculty, students, family and friends:

I am deeply grateful and honoured to receive this recognition, and delighted to find myself with you here today.

Eight years ago, I was in the early stages of choreographing a new work for my company. I usually start every creation by building what I call raw phrases. These are bits of choreography that become the official language of the creation—a vocabulary that the dancers and I become fluent in. Normally I would build these raw phrases on my own body first, and then expand and refine them with the dancers in the studio, but I was pregnant at the time and moving more carefully than usual. So I wrote a list of instructions: nine physical events that each dancer would craft into a raw choreographic phrase of his or her own making. The resulting phrases, when danced together, became an interface of synchrony and asynchrony, of simplicity and complexity, of order and chaos. So the list turned out to be a useful tool, and I've used it in several other projects since, changing the events to suit the subject, but essentially keeping the format.

So h

3. See what you see.
4. Drop into a wide stance, hands open.
5. Prepare to turn, then turn.
6. Let part of yourself fall, i.e. your wrist or your forehead, but catch it right before it hits the floor.
7. Retreat, as if protecting something fragile.
8. Expand in all directions, including inwards.
9. Kick high, and hard.

I'm a choreographer, so human beings, and their bodies, are my medium. But I'm actually not so interested in the body itself. I'm interested in the wordless language that it speaks: how the body gives shape to the soul; how it can manifest a disappearing trace of the divine. Creation is a dialogue with the unknown. The conversation can be illuminating or maddening but it is always sincere and generative.

Art is a meeting point between our knowledge and our imaginations. It's where we grapple with the beauty and brutality of our world. It can distill enormous concepts like love and war into something we can gather around and reckon with. It is a means of connection, understanding; a chance to inhabit other perspectives. Art is like looking through a lens, an opportunity to see the world in greater detail and clarity; it is a magnified experience.

Recently, I've created some things that were wrought from difficult subject matter, and pressurized with expectation. People asked how I've coped. Two things. The first: I never do this alone. I collaborate. I get advice. I get support, inspiration and love. I have amazing people around me and some of them are here today. Secondly, creation, even when turbulent, is inherently joyful. Creation requires us to stay awake and open, to be playful, to take risks. To make something, even out of despair, is to engage with the world with sincerity and earnestness.

Earnestness. It's hard to say. And it kind of has an un-cool ring to it. But what does it mean? Earnestness is leaning into life with hope and trust and curiosity. Like art, it is a form of love. Earnestness takes more energy than cynicism, and more courage. We need to stay earnest in order to affect change, to cope, to heal and to wonder. And we need art for the same reasons.

And you are all here today because of your energy and your courage. And I want to

See what you see.

Widen your stance, open your hands.

Prepare to change, then change.

Let part of yourself fall, but catch it right before it hits the floor.

When retreating, protect fragile things.