

SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY  
SPRING CONVOCATION  
June 7, 8, 9 and 10, 2016

Convocation Address  
By Dr. Robert Bringhurst

*The degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa, was conferred on Dr. Robert Bringhurst during the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences ceremony on Thursday, June 9, 2016. The following is Dr. Bringhurst's Convocation address:*

Thank you very much. Madame Chancellor, Mr. President, ladies and gentleman I find it very hard to believe I've done anything that merits this honour, but I have too much respect for the university to refuse it. You may be making a mistake, but I am grateful to you for making it and happy to go along.

This is all too often how it goes with institutions and individuals. Institutions make decisions and individuals go along, because going along is easier than stepping out of line and saying, "Wait! You might be making a mistake!" Going along – with a crowd or a mob or an institution or an assumption – is a very dangerous practice. If the university teaches us anything at all, it must teach us not to leave decisions to others. It must teach us to think for ourselves and to find the courage to step out of line.

That's an old, familiar phrase: "think for yourself." But it's very peculiar. It means what it says, yet it doesn't. It means to do your own thinking, not to borrow your thinking from anyone else. Yet genuine thinking is never selfish. To think for yourself doesn't mean to be perverse, or to stand apart for the sake of attracting attention. It means to take a larger view, a deeper breath. It means to out-think the people and institutions who otherwise would do your thinking for you.

Henry David Thoreau called this kind of thinking civil disobedience. I think of it more and more as biological disobedience: an increasingly urgent duty we all have, to second-guess and question not just mobs and crowds, church and state, political parties and national energy boards, but also our own instincts and the species we belong to: a species with a very poor record of paying attention to the

planet on which we live. To engage in biological disobedience, you not only have to learn to step out of the crowd; you have to learn to think like an ecosystem.

The only word we have for "exemplary generosity" appears to be philanthropy: Greek for "the love of humankind." We don't have a word that means "love of the earth" or "respect for all species." Well we don't, so at times we have to out-think our own language in order to say what we mean.

Two thousand years ago the Roman poet Ovid described a golden age in which, he says, there were no governments or law-courts or policemen or universities either:

*nondum*

Línjì Yìxuán, who really was a Zen master, living in eastern China twelve centuries ago, often said something else to his visitors: 出家 (chū jiā!), Leave home!; and 出俗 (chū sú!), Leave convention behind!

That's good advice too, but it would be of little value for a well-trained anthropologist. You'd be telling her to do what she'd already done. Línjì never met an anthropologist. He was talking to people raised in an old and settled Confucian society: people who were trained from infancy in filial devotion: people trained to go along.

So these two contradictory words of advice are both, in their way, saying the same thing: Think for yourself – without letting yourself get in the way.

Thank you all very much and congratulations to you all.