

## Experimental psychologist

*An honorary Doctor of Science, honoris causa, was conferred on Dr. Pinker during the Arts and Social Sciences ceremony on Thursday, June 12, 2014. The following is Dr. Pinker's Convocation address:*

Madam Chancellor, Mr. President, members of the board of governors, senate, faculty, honoured guests and most important, graduands.

What did you all just pay for? The piece of paper you'll be holding cost about seventy-five thousand dollars, of which you and your parents paid about half, the taxpayers the rest. Granted, this is a bargain compared to my own institution, Harvard University, where the sticker price for a degree is *a quarter of a million* dollars. But even a Canadian education costs a pretty penny, and we may well ask what we are getting in return.

Each of you, of course, has enhanced your human capital, as President Petter emphasized in his address. Presumably you can now read, write, learn, plan, compute, and understand the workings of institutions better than when you walked through the campus gates four years ago. Economists tell us that the cost of these skills will pay for itself over the course of your careers in higher earnings for you and in higher prosperity for the country.

But if a university education was nothing more than glorified job training, it could dispense with a lot of expensive accoutrements, like libraries and research labs and professors with PhDs. And you could have whizzed through Simon Fraser more quickly and cheaply if you had skipped all that liberal education. Why did you spend time studying dead white European males? Why did you and the taxpayers foot the bill for courses on literature and sociology and philosophy and feminist theory?

Now, though I'd be the last to say that everything that goes on in the modern university is intrinsically worthy, I'm here to tell you that yes it was worth it—the ivory tower, the absent-

For several years I've immersed myself in the history of violence: why human beings seem to take so much pleasure in killing, maiming, torturing, raping, and enslaving one another, and more importantly, how we've gradually lost our taste for these pastimes. Because, believe it or not, the numbers show that violence of all kinds has been decreasing. The lucky citizens of a liberal democracy like Canada, for all its problems, are living in the most humane conditions in the history of our sorry species. And I believe that the enhancement of reason and knowledge that you have just paid for deserves a lot of credit for this happy development.

Let me start with an example of what I have in mind. In sixteenth-century Paris, a popular form of entertainment was cat-burning, in which a cat was hoisted in a sling on a stage and slowly lowered into a fire. According to the historian Norman Davies, the spectators, including kings and queens, "shrieked with laughter as the animals, howling with pain, were singed, roasted, and fi ~~CB~~

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