

Dreaming and Doing in the Context of a Maturation Milestone: Some Imperatives
for the Next Leg of the University of Guyana's Development Journey

Keynote Address, 47th Convocation of The University of Guyana

November 16, 2013 <> Year of the Golden Jubilee

Salutations and Introduction

Prime Minister, other government officials, Pro-Chancellor, Vice Chancellor and Principal, members of the diplomatic corps, lecturers, graduands, family, friends, and ladies and gentlemen all. Allow me, first, to thank the Vice Chancellor for the invitation to deliver this address, and to thank Registrar Vincent Alexander, a friend of almost four decades, for the nomination to do so.

Returning to Turkeyen brings back memories of being a student and a student leader here in the heady and exciting mid-late 1970s. Of course, the people who taught me are all gone—into retirement, abroad, or to The Great Beyond. I am still in touch with some who are in Guyana and in the United States, though. I was looking forward to chatting with Professor Harold Lutchman, later a Vice Chancellor of this institution, who taught me constitutional law, among other things. Harold is retired, but true to form, he is not resting. Earlier today I received a lovely letter explaining his absence; he is in Trinidad on business related to the Caribbean Court of Justice. Thank you, Harold, and safe travels.

Many years ago, when I was a Dean at Florida International University, I was asked to head a review team for the University of the West Indies, Mona. The other team members were Harold Lutchman and a Jamaican diplomat. Harold kept embarrassing me over the three days of meetings by insisting on telling each audience we met of his pride in serving on the team with a leader who he had

taught. Two years ago, when the United States Southern Command and Florida International University invited me to lead the Guyana Strategic Culture study, I was delighted to invite into the team two of my UG teachers—Dr. Perry Mars and Dr. Ken Danns.

It is good to see friends and colleagues, some from way back; others of more recent vintage. I am quite conscious that long speeches are not the desire of graduation audiences; there are certificates, diplomas, and degrees to be conferred, and there are parties to attend. Yet, I am also deeply conscious that although all Convocations are special, this 47th Convocation is extra special. It coincides with a momentous occasion for the University—its golden jubilee year.

Beyond this, as you would appreciate, speaking here is a point of pride for me, as a proud alumnus of this University, a member of the Class of 1980. Because of all this, and the fact that I travelled thousands of miles and for several hours for this event, I crave your indulgence to speak for more than the few minutes that both graduands and guests would prefer Convocation speakers to use.

Congratulations and Giants

Graduands, you are to be congratulated: you have completed notable educational journeys, whether you will be getting certificates, diplomas, and degrees; irrespective of whether they are first degrees or higher ones; regardless of whether they are research degrees or professional degrees; and no matter what field. Your accomplishments are much deserved and the celebratory events that will begin—or continue—later are well merited. Your dreams have come true; your basis for moving up socio-economic and career ladders has been affirmed—and confirmed.

But as you receive applause from family, friends, lecturers, co-workers, and others, as you indulge in understandable self-approbation, and as you celebrate

your educational achievements, remember the words of Isaac Newton, written in 1676, albeit sarcastically, to Robert Hooke: “If I have seen further, it is because of standing on the shoulders of giants.”

No achievement, by any of us, derives from only what we put into a pursuit. Not those by members of the Class of 1968 who are here; not me, who graduated three decades and three years ago; not you, the Class of 2013. We all stand on the shoulders of giants. So, graduands, whether or not you took time before now to appreciate this, I remind you that your success in graduating today is attributable to the work done by many people besides yourselves. Some of them came—and went—before you, and some of them are still around. They may not have made note-worthy discoveries as Isaac Newton did. I suspect that most of them do not view themselves as giants, and do not wear their contributions to your success on their sleeves; they bear no signs that say “I am your giant.”

Still, they are the ones who will have inspired you, sacrificed so you can have the time, treasure, or both, to pursue your educational journeys; they will have been the ones to take care of the children or siblings and bear the heavier share of family duties so you can travel to Turkeyen and study while at home, so you could devote time and talent to your educational enterprises. They may have gone the extra mile to ensure that you better grasp a complicated theorem or concept, prepare for an exam, or get the research material or the clinical placement or internship that was crucial to success.

Some of these giants are your mothers, fathers, grandmothers, grandfathers, and spouses. Thank them! They are your God-mothers, aunts and uncles, cousins, and other family members. Thank them! Some of these family members never had a chance to attend university, and have been living out their dreams through you.

Some, I am sure, are not your biological families, but your sociological families. Still, thank them!

Some of your giants have been your children; some have been your lecturers, your librarians, lab assistants, secretaries in various Faculties, Schools, and departments. Thank them! Some of them have been good friends. Indeed, some must have been your spiritual guides and counselors, whether pandit, priest, or Imam, offering consolation as you dealt with challenges at home or on the job, or managed illness or death of loved ones while attending UG. Thank them!

Surely some of you needed reassurance to hang in there, to be reminded of the wisdom of the Chinese philosopher, Confucius, who intoned: “Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time you fall.” Perhaps you might have been overwhelmed to the point of being paralyzed into immobility and needed to be hear motivating advice akin to that of Indian Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore: “You cannot cross the sea merely by standing and staring at the water.”

Whoever have been your giants, this Convocation should be about recognizing them, too. They are the people—some of whom might have gone to the great beyond before this day—that helped to make this day possible for you. So, here is my admonition to you graduands: as you celebrate your achievements, do not forget your giants, the people on whose shoulders you now stand. Keep in mind that you also will become giants for others later, and will want—and deserve—to be acknowledged. Indeed, I am sure many of you already are enabling others to stand on your shoulders; you already are other people’s giants.

But, graduands, I would like to go beyond admonition, to give you an assignment; here it is: within the next 72 hours, make a list of at least 12 of your

giants, and over the next 30 days find tangible ways to thank them for allowing you to stand on their shoulders. The thanks can take the form of an e-card, a Facebook posting, a tweet, cash, cattle, flowers, whatever. Perhaps some flowers at the gravesite of any giants recently deceased. Whatever way you chose, show tangible appreciation to your giants, especially those who are still around.

Dreaming and Doing

Let me add, though, that while your individual dreaming has come through with your graduation, this golden jubilee for the University also witnesses institutional dreaming that has come through; institutional dreaming by individuals, most of who have gone to The Great Beyond. And, like your individual successes, their institutional successes have not occurred simply by their dreaming; like you, they engaged in dreaming and doing.

I refer to the dreaming and doing by then-Premier, Dr. Cheddie Jagan, whose brainchild it was to create a basis for citizens of the then-colony of British Guiana to leverage tertiary education for individual social and economic mobility, and to provide a fillip to national economic and social development; the dreaming and doing by Minister of Education Cedric Nunes, founding Chancellor Edward Mortimer Duke, Founding Vice Chancellor and Principal Lancelot Hogben, and countless other nationalists and educators, bureaucrats and businessmen, and international agencies and foreign governments.

It was dreaming and doing that led from an inaugural class of 164 students pursuing degrees in Faculties of Arts, Arts and Sciences, and Social Sciences in 1963, to enrollment of over 5,500 students in 2013, in undergraduate programs in Faculties of Agriculture and Forestry, Health Sciences, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences, Technology, School of Education and Humanities and the School of

Earth and Environmental Sciences, pursuing more than 60 programs in Accountancy, Aeronautical Engineering, Agriculture, Architecture, Chemistry, Communication, Education, Engineering, Environmental Science, Forestry, Law, Medicine, Modern Languages, Nursing, Pharmacy and Social Work, among others. There are also post-graduate programs in the Faculties of Health Sciences, Natural Sciences, Social Sciences and Technology, and the Schools of Earth and Environmental Sciences and of Education and the Humanities.

Clearly, the dreamers and doers of the early 1960s and over the ensuing five decades acted in ways that resonated with the words of wisdom voiced by the late, noted, American educator Benjamin Elijah Mays, who said: "The tragedy of life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach. It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfilled, but it is a calamity not to dream."

The Founders dreamed and achieved, and I am among the 15,000 graduates over the 50 years who have been beneficiaries of their dreaming and doing. You, the Class of 2013, of some 1,400, are splendid additions to this list of beneficiaries of their dreaming and doing.

The dreaming and doing over the decades have witnessed many challenges, and challenges of all kind—budgetary, facilities, and staffing; challenges related to quality assurance, labor relations, leadership, and more. Undeniably, some of the challenges combined in time and severity to be crises, and at time crises that threatened the very existence of the University. Some were internal to the university, and others were spurred by national political vicissitudes.

In reflecting on the individual and institutional dreaming and doing and the challenges and opportunities of this University's 50 years of existence, I am reminded of some of the words of one of our literary luminaries who graced our

grounds when I studied here. I am referring to the poet Martin Carter. And, I am thinking of his poem “I come from the Nigger Yard.”

*I come from the nigger yard of yesterday
leaping from the oppressors' hate
and the scorn of myself;
from the agony of the dark hut in the shadow
and the hurt of things;
from the long days of cruelty and the long nights of pain
down to the wide streets of to-morrow, of the next day
leaping I come, who cannot see will hear.*

This momentous juncture, this golden jubilee is an opportune moment not only to acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of “the yesterdays,” but to ponder the prospects for “the tomorrows.”

Three Imperatives

For the University of Guyana to have salutary “tomorrows” that go beyond crisis management survival and that avoids its leaders being practitioners of the science of muddling through, I see the necessity for the following three Maturation Imperatives: an Economic Viability Imperative; an Academic Credibility Imperative; and a Diaspora Engagement Imperative.

The Economic Viability Imperative requires attention to UG’s business model, in relation to revenue generation and more. No state university can afford to rely solely on the state; not the one I have honor to lead; and not the University of Guyana. But the state must match platitudes with practice; it must put its money

where its mouth it. Sometimes budgetary estrangement, whether for fiscal or political reasons, can result in circumstances akin to being simply state-affiliated, or worse, state-castigated, in both financial and non-financial terms.

It may well be that the relevant power brokers on and off this campus desire a redefinition of the relationship between the University and the society. That would be a legitimate pursuit, and it may be one needed at this maturation moment. However, if that is the case let that be the case with full transparency and appropriate strategic planning redirection.

Yet, even if the government's coffers were over-flowing, the Economic Viability Imperative requires the University to seek and access a deeper and wider income platform, and not just from foreign governments and international agencies; but also from individuals and businesses here and abroad, to establish endowments for professorships and scholarships, and thereby enhance the prospects of the institution's Economic Viability and its Academic Credibility.

As well, critical to the new business model are two other factors: entrepreneurship by and within the University, and resource utilization that optimizes all possible savings, reduces waste, and enhances cost and time-efficiency. This requires reviewing and modifying business practices, and rules and regulations, some of which are likely both pre-modern in their vintage and derive from the nature of the University's financial and political umbilical connection to the State. The Economic Viability Imperative requires attention to having salaries that attract and retain quality academic and non-academic staff, to the physical plant, equipment, and supplies, and to placing a premium on competence without pandering to race or political affiliation.

Needless to say, there is a symbiotic relationship between the Economic Viability Imperative and the Academic Credibility Imperative, to which I turn next. Academic freedom must be practiced and not be mostly platitude. Remember the wisdom of Spanish philosopher George Santayana, whose works I first started reading at this University: “To know what people really think, pay regard to what they do, rather than what they say.”

Essential here is the maturity of the political power brokers—whichever political party is in government—to resist the temptation for political intrusion and micro-management. Yet, there is another critical factor: academic and non-academic staff must guard against abusing academic freedom, and the university must be intentional and consistent in applying sanctions where such occur. What is true for universities that are relatively old, like mine, which dates to 1895, is even truer for young one like UG: the failure to balance freedom with responsibility can serve to spawn crises where none need be, and undermine confidence in and respect for the University by stakeholders within and outside the society.

The Academic Credibility Imperative places the onus on the University’s leadership, and especially the academic staff, to eschew mediocrity and preach and practice Excellence as a value. Remember the Aristotelian proposition about Excellence: “We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act but a habit.” For the Academic Credibility Imperative to be genuine Excellence must be routinized as well as individualized **and** institutionalized—in expectations set, goals and targets established and pursued, in continuous improvement as a lived value, and in recognitions and rewards that celebrate Excellence. The pursuit of Excellence was instilled in me at this university, and I sought to sustain it in moving beyond this campus. There is reason to believe that the restoration of Excellence is an urgent necessity at both Ts: Turkeyen and Tain.

Whether I was in New York, Florida, or Virginia, I reminded myself and others—and I continue to do so in Georgia—of a statement attributable to Michelangelo: “The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it.” And, as we aim and reach, let us be guardians of integrity; academic corruption—whether plagiarism by students or lecturers, the illegal sale of services or property, or outright theft—is just as deplorable as non-academic corruption—whether outright graft and other forms.

Understandably, we aim and reach for greater educational heights to improve our individual and family circumstances and perhaps become rich. However, winning at all cost is not to be extolled; doing so devoid of integrity is neither commendable nor recommendable. Let me share with you one powerful sentence from the late Caribbean musician-philosopher, Bob Marley, that appears on one of the Quote Cards that I distribute on and off my campus in Georgia: “The greatness of a man is not in how much wealth he acquires, but in his integrity and his ability to affect those around him positively.” Thus, my advice to you is this: Do not sacrifice integrity on the altar of wealth!

The condition of our University as it celebrates its golden jubilee is such that it cannot realistically pursue the two Imperatives described above without embracing its alums, both within Guyana and in the Diaspora. The unfortunate reality is that most of the talent produced by UG is abroad, and some of us are in relative positions of influence, if not wealth. UG must be intentional in reaching out to, celebrating, and seeking time, talent, and treasure of its alums. The University of the West Indies offers a splendid model of fund-raising and friend-raising using its alums in the Diaspora as a main constituency. Indeed, many high schools in Guyana do this. UG must be intentional and sustained in similar efforts.

Conclusion

So, distinguished members of the audience, as I come to the end of these remarks, let me commend to you some more words from poet Martin Carter as we savor this milestone and celebrate the dreaming and doing of so many men and women of this land and other lands:

*I come from the nigger yard of yesterday
leaping from the oppressors' hate
and the scorn of myself
I come to the world with scars upon my soul
wounds on my body, fury in my hands
I turn to the histories of men and the lives of peoples.
I examine the shower of sparks the wealth of the dreams.
I am pleased with the glories and sad with the sorrows
rich with the riches, poor with the loss.
From the nigger yard of yesterday I come with my burden.
To the world of to-morrow I turn with my strength.*

Congratulations, Class of 2013, Happy Fiftieth Anniversary to the University of Guyana, and “Thank You” Dreamers and Doers!

Professor Ivelaw Lloyd Griffith, Ph.D.

Class of 1980

President

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