

# **One Insatiable Desire**

## ***Convocation Remarks – University of Regina***

***David T. Barnard***

***May 24, 2001***

Madame Chancellor, Minister, graduating students, friends and colleagues.

Today we all celebrate with those who are about to have their degrees, certificates and honours conferred on them. For those of us whose vocation is in the University, it is a high point in the academic year. For graduates and their friends and family members it is the formal recognition of several years of effort and accomplishment.

University years are formative in many ways.

Each of you has studied some particular sampling of the ideas and knowledge available in this society. That content has helped shape you as a thinking person, and has helped prepare you for the rest of your lives in the community – both local and global – and as participants in the economy. The University hopes that what you have learned has prepared you well.

But there is considerably more to the formation that has occurred while you have been here. These are years in which friendships are made – some of which will likely endure for the rest of your lives. I hope that among those are friendships with some of those who have taught you or helped you in other ways while you have been here, and that you will remember the University – and those people – with affection.

These are also years in which passions develop. Sometimes these are political passions, so that some of you will look for ways in which to shape our common life through political action. Sometimes these are spiritual passions, so that some of you will look for ways in which to help yourself and others find spiritual fulfillment. Sometimes these are passions for athletic pursuits, or for the theatre, or for many other ways of expressing your uniqueness and of making valuable contributions to our society.

I hope that among the passions that you will take away from the University is a passion for the life of the mind, for ideas and their pursuit and elaboration.

The Italian Francesco Petrarca, known to us in English as Petrarch, was influential in the awakening of Europe to ideas, both classical and contemporary, in the fourteenth century. Many of us know him best for his sonnets, but he wrote many other things as well. He is sometimes called the first modern man because his interests and ideas anticipate ours. One of my colleagues recently introduced me to some of Petrarch's letters. In one of them there is this passage, in which he describes a weakness that I share with him.

I am still in the thrall of one insatiable desire, which hitherto I have been neither able nor willing to check. ... I cannot get enough books. It may be that I have already more than I need, but it is with books as it is with other things: success in acquisition spurs the desire to get still more. Books, indeed, have a special charm. Gold, silver, gems, purple raiment, a house of marble, a well-tilled field, paintings, a steed with splendid trappings -- things such as these give but a silent and superficial pleasure. Books delight us through and through, they talk with us, they give us good counsel, they enter into a living and intimate companionship with us.

What is more, not only does a book win the reader's affection for itself, but it mentions the names of other books, so that one stirs the desire for another.<sup>1</sup>

Petrarch was trying to free himself from the control that other things exercised over him, but was unwilling to free himself from his desire for books. Let us take books here, as I am sure was the case for the writer, not as physical objects but as the embodiment of ideas and their expression.

I want to encourage you as you graduate and move to the next stages in your lives – whatever they might be – to cultivate this passion. Not for books as objects, but for books as the carriers of ideas.

I hope that you have been stimulated by what you have learned here, and by the experience of talking to others – both students and faculty members – about ideas. And I hope that you might be leaving here with this one insatiable desire: to continue to read and to learn, and to talk about ideas. From this you will get good counsel and intimate companionship, not just from the books themselves but also from those with whom you discuss them.

On behalf of the University I wish you well in whatever lies ahead of you.

---

<sup>1</sup> from *Epistolae Familiares* III 18, in *Petrarch at Vacluse: Letters in Verse and Prose Translated by Ernest Hatch Wilkins*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.