

Convocation Address, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, Dalhousie University May 28, 2024. Dr. Ajay Parasram. Check Against Delivery.

Thank you Dr. Harvey, President Brooks, Chancellor Southwell, Elder Tom Christmas, Elder Ann LeBillois, Dr. Spiteri, Dr. DuBois, Dr. Leonard, Dr. Halpin, Ms. Fraser, colleagues, and most of all, thank you to the class of 2024! It is a distinct honour to address the convocation this year.

The purpose of my talk today is quite simple - to explain to you why students represent the very best of the university.

When I was working on my undergraduate degree, it was in the shadow of a shapeshifting, so-called “Global War on Terrorism.” I was an Economics and Political Science major, taking classes between Dalhousie University and the University of British Columbia – nuclear war, international organizations, game theory, globalization, peace and conflict studies, political philosophy and comparative religion. Calculus too, but shortly after that incident I became just a Poli Sci major!

My professors were working hard to prepare us, as best they could, for the world that we were inheriting in the early days a new millennium. Very few classes were able to prepare me for the unfolding climate catastrophe or even the slow realization that I was a settler in an ongoing project of settler-colonization – things you probably knew since grade school.

My professors were only able to prepare me for the world that they knew, not the world that I would navigate through my 20s and 30s. Just like your

professors, try as we might, can really only prepare you for the world that we know. Your education is thus always only partial. The cornerstone of my learning as a student come from friendships and deep solidarities built *around* classes, in student-led movements that worked hard to forge connections and solidarities with diverse communities of people beyond the university.

Within these intellectual and political spaces, people were more concerned with how to put into practice core principles of justice, fairness, and humanity that made up the bedrock of our Arts and Social Sciences degrees. We read the Western philosophers, yes, but we worked hard to read everyone else too. If ever there was a verse that captures the very best of learning, it's Marcus Garvey, popularized by Bob Marley, who reminds us "emancipate yourselves from mental slavery, none but yourself can free your mind."

I take solace in Roots Reggae music all the time, but especially in the hardest of times. Over the last academic year, I have met with dozens, if not hundreds of students – most of whom were not actually taking any of my classes. It hurt my heart to see how many of you have been suffering alone, because from October to now, the ruling classes within our society has tried to convince us all that we must get on with our semesters, go to work, keep the economy going and pretend that Israel was merely fighting the latest front of the same never ending global war on terrorism that was raging when I was in your seats.

One of you approached me in November, in tears, asking what the point of studying international law, foreign policy, social justice, humanities, and all the rest, if the most educated and privileged people in the world could not stop a genocide from unfolding in real time. What's worse, this student told me, is that even raising these issues in class seemed impossible in 2023. What a scathing indictment of failure, not of you, but of us, the university, to leave you to dwell in the cognitive dissonance of war and to allow the media and mainstream society to tell you that it is violent to show a picture of a watermelon, but that it is counter-terrorism to destroy every university in Gaza while laying siege to refugee camps with impunity.

People will tell you to be patient - that politics happens through diplomacy – the kind of diplomacy that allows settler colonies like Canada and the United States to say they are appalled at the human suffering in Rafah while not lifting a finger to stop the flow of arms into Israel. If you have been watching the news out of Gaza this week, you could be forgiven for thinking that the ruling classes of the Western world seem content to wait for the genocide to run its full course before dusting off their speaking notes from Rwanda, Sudan, and Germany so they can teary-eyed say “never again” until the next time.

It's not politics as usual that changes the world for the better. In fact, it's the exact opposite, and at the heart of that opposition to accepting the world as we inherit it, are students just like you.

Real democratic politics, as the French philosopher Jacques Ranciere reminds us, is about stoppages, rather than movement. The policing power

in society – something much broader than the actual police – compels us to be too busy to stop and pay attention to the horrors unfolding. Enforcers of the status quo tell us to “keep moving,” to “move along, because there’s nothing to see here.”

But there are always principled people among us who reject that logic. People who bravely refuse to move-along are the real agents of democracy because when they stand still, the whole machinery comes to a halt.

This democratic power to “stop” is what brought the British Raj to its knees in South Asia. The democratic power to stop, to boycott, to divest, and to sanction, helped to bring the white supremacist South African Apartheid regime to an end in the 1990s. I tell you honestly, we would not even be recycling today if it wasn’t for student led environmental leadership in the 1980s and 1990s challenging the norm of throwing trash out the window of a car.

Students have always been at the forefront of these democratic stoppages, we have seen it across the world, in Burma, in Tiananmen Square, in Berlin, in the streets of Seattle and yes, across university campuses demanding that we not have convocation as usual, or conferences as usual, when our institutions and countries have the ability to follow the example of our students and do the work of stopping the flow of funds, credibility, and arms to force a ceasefire that the majority of humanity have been demanding for months

I have been given permission from **Al Zeitoun University** – the beautiful name chosen by students from Dalhousie, Kings, Saint Mary's U, NSCAD, and Mount Saint Vincent for the encampment in the quad – to extend heartfelt congratulations to you all on finishing your degrees. They extend an invitation to you all, to come visit Al Zeitoun, and spend some time with the students in Kjipuktuk who decided that they would force a stoppage and literally HOLD SPACE on the campus so that students, faculty, and the broader community would not “move along” and continue ignoring Palestine any longer. Through their solidarity over the past few weeks, the Dalhousie Faculty Association has been able to pass motions regarding Gaza, including a call for Dalhousie to boycott, divest, and sanction Israel in much the same vein as we did as a University in 1986 to Apartheid South Africa until a democratic state for all can be plausible. I am glad to share a stage with Ms. Fraser and President Books today, so that they know clearly what students and faculty require of the university in the weeks to come.

I urge you all to join me after the procession to walk from Dalhousie to Al Zeitoun University on the iconic quad in front of the Hicks Building. Let's spend just a few minutes ahead of your well deserved reception to thank the students who have chosen to stop rather than simply move along, and in so doing, remind us of what it means to act as if what we study in university matters.

The truth is, regardless of where you go from here on with your lives, if you don't have a political project of your own, you are already unconsciously part of someone else's. Your degrees have prepared you better than most to make sure that you act with purpose in all things that you do.

Remember what the young 20-something year old Karl Marx said, when he too was a rabble rousing student activist. Marx wrote, in his 11th thesis on the Feuerbach - **“The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change it.”**

Congratulations, class of 2024! You are the very best of us!