

## **You are Everything**

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*In 2021, McGill University elected to cancel in-person convocation ceremonies in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The following address was delivered at an unofficial gathering of students graduating from the Schulich School of Music at McGill. The gathering took place on May 2, 2021, outdoors at the Pointe du Moulin in Montreal, Québec.*

My name is Darin Barney, I am Professor and Grierson Chair in Communication Studies at McGill University. I have also been a Canada Research Chair, Department Chair, Graduate Program Director, Senator, Governor, spouse of a McGill administrator and, most importantly, a McGill parent (twice!). So: while this is not an official McGill ceremony and I do not represent the university, I am about as McGill as one person can be, and it is my very great honour to be with you today to celebrate the achievement of your degrees.

A convocation, even an informal one such as this, is a gathering. So we begin today by acknowledging that we gather on the unceded traditional territory of the Kanien'kehá:ka people. The island called "Montréal" is known as Tiotia:ke in the language of the Kanien'kehá:ka, and it has historically been a site of meeting and exchange amongst Indigenous peoples, including the Haudenosaunee Confederacy and the Anishinaabeg nation. We offer our thanks to the Kanien'kehà:ka as longstanding custodians of these lands and waters.

In a moment, I will invite to you to reflect on what this acknowledgment means to you in the context of your own life, and the circumstances that have brought you here today, whether you are a member of an Indigenous community in Canada or elsewhere, a descendent of settlers who came here intentionally or with little choice, a descendent of those who were displaced or brought forcefully to North America, a recent settler, or a visitor to this country and this territory. We are all connected to and through these histories, and we live and work with their legacies and in their ongoing contexts.

When I think about my own relationship to this history, I recall that my ancestors were agricultural settlers who fled persecution in the Ukraine and came to Canada, settling on the lands of the Cree, Saulteaux and Assiniboine peoples, on what is now Treaty 4 land in Saskatchewan. I am quite certain that, at the time, they were unaware of the true cost of the land that was offered to them as "free." But I am aware of it now, as I am a beneficiary of both their hard work, and the dispossession upon which it was built. These are complicated matters, and land acknowledgements are not solutions to the problem of living with and through them – they are instead invitations to stay with the trouble of our complex relationships to the history of settler colonialism in Canada, especially when we gather, as we do today, literally in the shadows of one of the ruins of that history.



And I will also invite you to reflect on the many others who are not, and a cannot be with us here today. This includes friends and family who, due to Covid-19 restrictions, could not travel to be here to celebrate with us. It includes loved ones that we have lost to the pandemic, or for other reasons, in this past year. And it includes those who are presently at great risk in places where the pandemic is raging with devastating intensity. These people are not here but, like the original, Indigenous inhabitants of these lands, they are also not absent. We make them present, and gather them to us, by acknowledging, thanking and remembering them. I invite you all to take a moment to do that with me now.



Normally, we would not be gathering here. We would gather on the field of the lower campus at McGill. We would be robed. There would be a bagpiper. The ground would be throbbing with the collective energy of parental relief and pride. Tracey Smith-Bessette would sing the *alma mater*. You would be addressed by someone fit to address you: a musician, a singer, a composer, a conductor, someone you admire and who would recognize and inspire you in terms that only you musicians really understand. And you would walk the excellent walk to receive your degrees in front of a thousand of your peers and loved ones. There would be shouts of joy at the calling of your names. Someone would break a heel, or catch a hem, on the way up the stairs to the platform (someone always breaks a heel or catches a hem!).

But these are not normal times. We are not gathered on campus and you are not being addressed by a musician; we are gathered at the Lachine Canal in front of an abandoned grain elevator, and you are being addressed by someone who actually knows a lot more about that grain elevator than he does about music. We are missing out on a lot. But here we are: you are here with me, and so I will address you: as scholars, as graduates, as friends, as my daughter, and as musicians.

At convocation we gather to mark your graduation. Graduation is a time like no other: a liminal moment between past and future. We gather to celebrate what you have done – what you have accomplished – but also to inaugurate what you are about to do, what you are becoming, even if you do not know what that is yet. Graduation always produces a strange feeling somewhere between achievement and uncertainty but, this year, it is especially strange. I have been saying we are here to celebrate, but celebration somehow seems odd, and maybe doesn't feel right, after the year we have endured and in light of the suffering that persists around us.

As I said: I don't know anything about music, but I do love rock and roll (I mean, I *really* love it). As I was thinking about how I would address you today, I thought about a rock and roll song I love. It is from 1988, before most of you were born. It was written by Michael Stipe of the American band REM. It's called, "You are the Everything."

It starts like this: "Sometimes I feel like I can't even sing. I'm very scared for this world. I'm very scared for me."

I imagine – indeed, *I know* – that many of you must have felt that way, probably more than once, in the past year. Very scared for this world. Very scared for yourselves. You must have felt like you could not even sing. *And, yet, you sang* – or played, or composed, or conducted, or wrote.

You sang.

The world in which you did your work and accomplished what you have accomplished, the world in which you are now called to become who and what you are becoming, is not an easy world.

In the next verse of the song, Michael Stipe sings, "I think about this world a lot, and I cry and I've seen the films and the eyes."

It's not just Covid. It's the violence of racism, and sexism and homophobia and poverty that greets us everyday on our screens and on our streets and in our workplaces. It's the monster of climate change. It's a lot, and it's very scary. Sometimes, it makes you feel like you can't even sing.

And yet, still you sing – or play, or compose, or conduct, or write. You sing.

How is that even possible? What sort of strength, what sort of resolve, what sort of purpose enables you to do that? I am addressing this question to you: *who even are you that you can even sing under these conditions?* Where did you learn that?

Stipe finds his strength in the declining body of his aging grandmother. When he is just about to succumb to the despair of living in a world that is just too hard, he catches a glimpse of her "drifting off to sleep with her teeth in her mouth," and he says – I should say, he *sings* – "I am in this kitchen. Everything is beautiful. And she is so beautiful, she is so young and old."

And then he sings this:

"I look at her and I see the beauty of the light of music."

That is what I see when I look at all of you and, if you look at each other right now, you will see it: *the beauty of the light of music*. That is what you have. That is what you are. That is what got you through this scary year and it is what will see you into and through your uncertain futures.

From where do we muster the courage and strength to sing in times we feel like we can't even sing? Michael Stipe looks at his grandmother sleeping in the kitchen and sees the beauty of the light of music – and the word for that light is surely *love* – and he sings. He sings, even though he is not sure he can even sing, because, despite all the disappointments of the world he is sure of this: everything is beautiful, and she is so beautiful, and there is love.

*You sang*. You sang because you know these things. And you *will* sing – whether your future is as a professional musician or not – you will sing. Even at times when you are not sure that you can even sing. You will sing, because that is who you are. It is what you do, and what you have

learned. It is what you love. That is what we celebrate together here today. And it is something you should hold onto more tightly than any scroll.

Professors always end their lectures by asking: “Any questions?” In this case, I think there is only one: how does the song end?

It is almost as if Michael Stipe wrote the song specifically for this occasion. After seeing the beauty of the light of music, he sings, in celebration:

“You are here with me. You are here with me. You have been here and you are everything.”

*You are everything.* Just keep being that, becoming that, and everything will be all right.