

Good evening parents, friends, faculty and staff members, and especially our new students, the class of 2014. Welcome, as they say, to the first day of the rest of your lives. And this really is the first day of something new and different for you, something that will change you forever. I'm sure that at this moment many of you feel a bit like runaways – leaving the security and familiarity of your towns and your families, the people and the places that you have called home, and coming to this new, strange, exciting, and scary place called University. Everybody is scared when University starts up in the fall. Parents are scared that their children will be unhappy, or homesick, or picking up all sorts of bad habits from their new environment. Staff and faculty are scared that they haven't got all their lectures sorted out, or that they forgot to order some important textbook, or that the bulb will burn out on the data projector at a critical moment. Don't let them fool you, your professors are just as nervous on the first day of classes as you are; no one gets over that feeling of a new beginning and not knowing how it will work out, a feeling like that moment at the top of the roller coaster just before the heart-wrenching descent. And **you're** a little scared, too, no matter how blasé you've been with your parents, how confident you feel in your new residence room, how hungry you are for that freedom that University life promises. The dancer Twyla Tharp said, "Art is the only way to run away without leaving home" and tonight I'm going to talk to you about art and creativity, and to tell you that now that you've run away from home quite literally, that you're going to run away a little bit more around **here** and that that's okay.

One thing you probably don't know is that we as professors and administrators in the University go to conferences and presentations all about teaching and student services, and one thing they talk about at these events is the current generation of students and what qualities define them. I think you are still young enough now to be so-called "Millennial students" – you are supposed to be tech savvy and culturally hip. You like your information fast and from a variety of sources. You're hooked in through Facebook and social networking which makes you connected on a level unprecedented in the modern world. You are highly confident, you enjoy and expect to get top marks, you look out for number one, and you're all about earning degrees and accreditation, being upwardly mobile, and securing a well-paid, prestigious job. You are very close to your parents and they play a large role in your education and your everyday life. You are all about success, and very clear markers of successes – money, career, status, and leadership. You feel entitled to these things. You want to *change* the world through social action and *save* the world through environmental and political action. My typical job as Commencement speaker is to tell you that this is great – the world is falling apart, and guess what? You're the only people who can save it. The onus is on you to *be* more, *give* more, and fix all the things that your parents' generation and their parents' generation messed up on this planet. Great, isn't it? No pressure or anything. But I read something recently which I thought was quite funny in light of this. All the people who come up with these descriptions of your generation actually asked *you* what was important to you; and you know what? Saving the world and being number one were not at the top of the list. Your generation, more than anything else, wants healthy relationships, more time with people, jobs that will pay you enough so that you can have a rich and satisfying family life; that you want happiness, contentment, and meaning – who would have guessed, you want to have what we call "normal lives." Now, I'm not telling you not to take political or environmental action,

I'm not telling you not to excel at your studies, or not follow your dreams, or not think big, or not save the world. I mean, secretly we're all hoping that you will do those things. But you've obviously already figured out some things - instinctively you already know that real freedom and happiness and contentment is what matters and it is not about the trappings and external markers of so-called "success". It can only come from *within* and it is this "within" that we are going to engage in this place, often and consistently. And it may not surprise you to know that one of the most potent ways we engage it is through the arts.

So you're already thinking, okay who is this woman and what is she going to go on about? I'm a biology major, I'm a math major, I'm a history major, I'm in Commerce. What does she want me to do? Take a music history class or go to an art gallery? Yes, she does want you to do those things. Aren't those a waste of time - where is that going to get me? Actually, it is going to get you everywhere and it is going to give you everything. Don't deny it, what's on your iPod means something to you. It moves you, it makes you think, it makes you feel, it motivates you, it calms you. It also defines you. You've cried at a film, in the dark theatre, even though you think nobody noticed. You've been challenged by a drama on television, you've been fascinated by a photograph, you've read a book that you thought about long after you turned the last page. That's because you, whoever you may have become on the outside, are also artists inside and so art speaks to you in a way that almost nothing else can.

Professor Howard Ikemoto, remembers, "When my daughter was about seven years old, she asked me one day what I did at work. I told her I worked at the college - that my job was to teach people how to draw. She stared at me, incredulous, and said, "You mean they forget?"

All of you were born artists; you drew, you painted, you sculpted, and you did it spontaneously and passionately and often. You sang, you danced, and you acted, without a script or a musical score or a lesson, without any self-consciousness. Do you remember that? And do you see that person when you look in the mirror? The question then is not, how do you take part in creativity and culture in the university, how do you sprinkle it on to your full schedule like a condiment -- but instead how do you reconnect with that *person*, that spiritual and open artist that you were before society and education and, to a certain extent, this thing called "culture," taught you to hide and deny? That person who was focused only on wonder, awe, and uncensored self-expression? We should not assume that becoming an adult, that thing which everyone is telling you you're supposed to be now, means that you become more serious, more reserved, more self-monitoring, less authentic. Indeed, it is just the opposite. Now that you are free of high school and the institutions that seek to shape your behavior and your attitudes to a norm, you are now in a place where questioning those norms is encouraged and rewarded, a place that celebrates your individuality, a place where difference of opinion is valued and expected, where you find your voice, your opinions, and your perspective, a place where some of your most firmly-held beliefs will be challenged and dismantled and in their place will develop new, more nuanced, more thoughtful beliefs, born of deep contemplation and deep communication with those around you. Yes, you will become an adult, but that means precisely letting go of the blacks and whites you may have been taught and embracing

a wonderful world of endlessly variegated greys. Art forces us to constantly rethink and reassess our attitudes and our thoughts, to give us beauty but also restlessness, and so the University is the largest and greatest art gallery in the world, where ideas are constantly on display, to be contemplated, to be taken in, to be discussed, to create wonder and possibility and hope. But you know what is most important about art, and this wonderful art gallery? It doesn't and couldn't exist in a vacuum. It is created only by people; it is created only for people. There is nothing more humanizing than art, and no better way to become who we are than through our artistry and creativity. And that's ultimately what you are here to do: to become who you are. Who you already are. And you can't do that unless you find that inner artist, the one who yearns for connection to others and reconnection with your authentic self. Where do you start?

We have four art galleries in this town, several music venues for concerts of all different kinds, a professional theatre company, a library full of literature, streets that post poetry on the lampposts even. Experience them. We have a performing arts series that will introduce you to music you've never heard before. We have guest speakers and artists who will give talks that offer perspectives you've never considered before. Go to them. We have courses in art, in poetry, in literature, in music, in drama that are open to you as first-year students. Take some of them. But wonderfully, creativity doesn't just exist within the confines of the Arts with a capital A. You can take a first-year computer science course in media computing where you will learn how to paint with the computer. The best submissions will form a special art show in a gallery. Are you surprised? You can take a course in Commerce in the marketing of the arts in which you will go into the community and interact with people running such galleries, to discover their values and how they operate. You will be studying with professors who are exceptionally creative – chemists and physicists who are creating new substances, people finding non-invasive ways to conduct medical tests, geographers using methods to figure out how old buildings are, mathematicians finding creative ways of solving problems. Professors in Canadian Studies are finding new ways to view our country, social scientists are creating new ways of building a just society. When you look around you, in fact, you will discover that this whole place is vibrating with creativity, regardless of the discipline, because that's what we're about here, in our great art gallery, the university. And we have to be very creative now, because as Einstein reminds us, the level of thinking that got us to where we are will not be sufficient to get us out of where we are. Sorry, there's that saving the world again, I didn't mean to keep reminding you of that.

Here at Mount Allison you can join the Garnet and Gold society and star in a musical; you can take part in a Windsor theatre production – anyone can audition, not just drama majors. You can explore your songwriting talents, maybe appear on our "Conduct Becoming" CD in which Sackville musicians raise money for cancer research – anyone can compose, not just music majors. You can sign up for a new club who will use the book *The Artist's Way* by Julia Cameron to create a thirteen-week program in reconnecting with your inner artist – anyone can join, not just music, art and drama majors. You can steal an afternoon here and there to read a novel that isn't required for your courses. You can unplug from the din of Facebook and Twitter and email and just listen to some music, just for the joy of it, in the quietness of

your room. But isn't this just self-indulgence? Isn't this just "entertainment"? No, because becoming who you are is task number one, remember, and becoming yourself also means becoming part of everything around you. The great German poet Goethe wrote, "There is no surer method of evading the world than by following Art, and no surer method of linking oneself to it than by Art." The Arts renew us at the deepest level, and connect us to each other at the deepest level.

Regardless of whether you take my advice or not, when you graduate from this place in four years, I do guarantee you some things: you will have disciplinary knowledge; you'll have tools and experiences and skills to get a job; you will have learned a lot and changed a lot. But if you listen to me tonight, and you embrace the arts, seek out creativity, and pay attention to your own self-expression, your own artist, I have no doubt that you will have something more, the something that your generation says it *really wants*: good relationships, that job that allows you time and energy for your families, contentment, happiness, meaning. You will know instinctively and surely and deeply what creates those connections, and those meanings, and what's important; but even more you'll know what is within you to give and what is within you to create, and you will be drawn joyfully and passionately to give and create those things. And you know what? If you do that, I think you really *will* save the world.

Thank you.