



**SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY**  
**SPRING CONVOCATION**  
**June 10, 11, 12 and 13, 2014**

**Convocation Address**  
**By Dr. John Maeda**  
Renowned graphic designer

*An honorary Doctor of Fine Arts, honoris causa, was conferred on Dr. John Maeda during the Communication, Art and Technology and the Faculty of Environment ceremony on Friday, June 13, 2014. The following is Dr. Maeda's Convocation address:*

I don't know all of you, but I wish I knew you. I have been trying to absorb all of you inside here, it's kind of hard, but as I was walking back through that corridor and you had that pipe band on both sides, stereo, it was quite awesome. So I think that your colleagues spoke for all of you. Why I thought that was so important is because (as I was listening to the Madam Chancellor's remarks, I took away her comment), it was about 'to seek opportunity to become a leader'.

Now, when I was a student I had no idea what that phrase meant. I was like "oh, what's happening after commencement? I'm not sure, but I have to meet that person, that person, and, what did that person say?" But I want to pause for a second on that question of the opportunity to become a leader. All of you will have that chance, and you already embody it... I just can't imagine the moment when you told your parents that you have this envelope that you got into SFU... And there was a moment when you said "I'm going to do that. People say it's hard, but I'm going to do it..." And at that moment, you all became leaders. Note that, hold it in your minds, I'm trying to hold it for you as well. I didn't know what it meant.

Secondly, I am a creative person. And therefore, as a creative person, I cannot think linearly, you know what I mean? ... and the squirrel runs by and you're like, 'what's that over there?' In a sense because you're trying to find the tune, the rhythm of the world. So I'm trying to find it in the last, actually, 20 minutes. And I think I found part of it. I found it, first of all, last night. Ivana Filipovich, thank you for nominating me for this esteemed honour, so thank you for that. And secondly, Professor Wakkary, who was so kind to really kind of like take me around (you know, it was like driving Mrs. Daisy, or Mr. Daisy). She was so kind to show me the town, help me understand the faculty, and the mission you

have here. And I was so struck by how, being a former professor, to get the chance to be your colleague I felt was something I missed in life. So I want to note that. It was a wonderful feeling to be with you these times.

Because I am, in different moments of my life, have lost faith in academia. Many occasions. And I can go back, to when I was a student at MIT, I was an undergraduate, and graduate, I was in a PhD course, and I had to drop out, because I had a bad professor. Anyone ever had a bad boss? Maybe no one's had a bad boss or a bad professor, but I had a bad professor. And so I dropped out of MIT. I didn't believe in universities, I just don't believe anymore. But years later I found a professor named Akira Harada in Japan. He was a strange man. He would just like, you know, come closer, and scribble things on his paper and I was like 'I want to learn from him.' And so I did my PhD under him, and just when I was about to graduate, he told me this story. He drank a lot, but you know, he told me this story, and he was very happy that night. He told me about how he remembered when he was a child growing up during World War II in Japan, and went to college in Japan. And he was saying how he remembered there was no food, all the food went to the soldiers. His family was wealthy, so his family was able to get rice, which was a very rare commodity to have – no one else could have rice, but he had rice, it was a banking family. And he said "every day I go to school, I bring my little bento box and I have rice, and have a little red little umay thing, a plum, Japanese-flag red, white. Every day". He said one day he came to school, this is in second grade, he got to school and he realized: "I forgot my lunch." And he said, "teacher, I forgot my lunch" and the teacher said, "oh, don't worry, because I made too much lunch today, so just come by my desk at lunchtime and you can help me out". He says, "no problem teacher, I'll help you out". And so lunch time rolls around, and then he comes to her desk, and she opens up her little bento box, and it has two tiny potatoes. And she says, "I made too much" and he says "no problem teacher", and he scarfed up the potato. But years later he realized that was something special the teacher did for him. And at that moment, my professor showed me and reminded me how teaching is a kind of intellectual philanthropy. So, I firmly believe in what has happened here, the giving of the potatoes has been an important thing. So I want to thank the faculty for that potato giving. It's not easy to give away potatoes.

Secondly, on this note of leadership, when I became a professor I thought the challenge of becoming a professor in any academic institution is that there's no job training. They don't teach you what to do, or how to do things, and it was pretty hard to figure my way through. I had this dean, Bob Sylvie, Dean of Science. I would go to his meetings, and I would learn every time from watching him do things. And so I learned how to be a leader just watching this dean from far away. And the one thing you learn as a leader, as we all know, is that when we lead we will always fail. And when we fail, the question is how will we recover? And I believe that we recover by remembering things. I'm going to share with you a memory of Bob Sylvie.

Bob Sylvie inspired me to become a leader. And when I became president of a college, I began to think: 'what would Bob do'? And I became so busy with what I was doing, that it was a year into the fact of knowing that he had passed away... and if anything, I thought 'oh my gosh, I lost my chance to thank

Bob'. And so I wrote to his wife, who is a professor at MIT, just saying how Bob changed my life, made me think I could make a difference as a leader. And she wrote back within eight hours, and she said, "oh, thanks for writing this letter, Bob [she called him Bobby], I knew him from high school. We were high school sweethearts, we got married, we became professors" and she just wrote this wonderful letter. And she said the thing she remembered about Bobby was how he was a man who lived in a way where he had ego, but that he had confidence without ego. And I think about that a lot. How do you, as you become who you are, you know, be able to have that confidence, that ego, it's a hard balance as leaders. So I invite you to all find that somehow, to fail a lot, fail to find that balance, it's a good adventure.

On that note, congratulations and thank you for this honour.