



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

Convocation Address
By Dr. Steven Pinker
Experimental psychologist

An honorary Doctor of Science, honoris causa, was conferred on Dr. Pinker during the Arts and Social Sciences ceremony on Thursday, June 12, 2014. The following is Dr. Pinker's Convocation address:

Madam Chancellor, Mr. President, members of the board of governors, senate, faculty, honoured guests and most important, graduands.

What did you all just pay for? The piece of paper you'll be holding cost about seventy-five thousand dollars, of which you and your parents paid about half, the taxpayers the rest. Granted, this is a bargain compared to my own institution, Harvard University, where the sticker price for a degree is *a quarter of a million* dollars. But even a Canadian education costs a pretty penny, and we may well ask what we are getting in return.

Each of you, of course, has enhanced your human capital, as President Petter emphasized in his address. Presumably you can now read, write, learn, plan, compute, and understand the workings of institutions better than when you walked through the campus gates four years ago. Economists tell us that the cost of these skills will pay for itself over the course of your careers in higher earnings for you and in higher prosperity for the country.

But if a university education was nothing more than glorified job training, it could dispense with a lot of expensive accoutrements, like libraries and research labs and professors with PhDs. And you could have whizzed through Simon Fraser more quickly and cheaply if you had skipped all that liberal education. Why did you spend time studying dead white European males? Why did you and the taxpayers foot the bill for courses on literature and sociology and philosophy and feminist theory?

Now, though I'd be the last to say that everything that goes on in the modern university is intrinsically worthy, I'm here to tell you that yes it was worth it—the ivory tower, the absent-minded professors, the abstract theory, and yes, the dead white European males.

For several years I've immersed myself in the history of violence: why human beings seem to take so much pleasure in killing, maiming, torturing, raping, and enslaving one another, and more importantly, how we've gradually lost our taste for these pastimes. Because, believe it or not, the numbers show that violence of all kinds has been decreasing. The lucky citizens of a liberal democracy like Canada, for all its problems, are living in the most humane conditions in the history of our sorry species. And I believe that the enhancement of reason and knowledge that you have just paid for deserves a lot of credit for this happy development.

Let me start with an example of what I have in mind. In sixteenth-century Paris, a popular form of entertainment was cat-burning, in which a cat was hoisted in a sling on a stage and slowly lowered into a fire. According to the historian Norman Davies, the spectators, including kings and queens, "shrieked with laughter as the animals, howling with pain, were singed, roasted, and finally carbonized."

It wasn't just cats that our ancestors burned alive as a form of popular entertainment, but also people, namely heretics and infidels. There were many other kinds of everyday brutality. Knights waged constant war by killing as many of each other's peasants as they could. Kings executed people for frivolous reasons, like stealing a cabbage or criticizing the royal garden. The executions were designed to be unspeakably agonizing, like crucifixion, disemboweling, or breaking on the wheel. When petty lawbreakers weren't tortured to death, they had body parts cut off, like hands, noses, and tongues. Governments sent debtors, including widows, to prison. Respectable people bought and sold slaves. The law recognized the right of a husband to rape his wife.

How did we manage to eliminate these barbaric practices? It's not that human nature has changed. We still harbor instincts that tempt us toward violence. But we also have faculties that steer us away—what Abraham Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature". And our better angels have increasingly gotten the upper hand, not least because of the expansion of knowledge and reason that a liberal education fosters.

In the academic tradition in which you have just been immersed, scholars and students try to understand where we come from, what makes us tick, how the world works. Man's inhumanity to man has long been a subject for moralization. But with the knowledge that something has driven it down, we can also treat it as a matter of cause and effect. Instead of just asking "Why is there war?" we can also ask "Why is there peace?"—a research question, by the way, that Simon Fraser's Human Security Report Project is one of the world's leaders in studying and answering. The hope is that when we find the answer we can concentrate and bottle the crucial ingredients it and apply them more in the future.

There is another reason to nurture the educated mind. It is not just a tool with which we can understand moral progress, but one of its causes. A major reason we have such a dumbfounded reaction to the viciousness of our ancestors practices is that we know so much more about the world.

- We don't kill virgins on an altar or throw them into volcanoes, because we know that it would not, in fact, propitiate an angry god or alleviate misfortune on earth.
- We don't expel or murder Jews, because we know that they do not, in fact, conspire to control the world economy.
- We don't enslave Africans or displace First Nations because we know that they are not, in fact, on a lower rung of some evolutionary ladder with whites at the top.
- We don't burn witches because we know there is no such thing as a witch.
- We don't cut the intestines out of living prisoners because we know that there are more effective and humane ways of deterring crime.
- We don't – or at least shouldn't -- follow leaders who say that they are on a mission from God or who are certain of the purity of their moral crusade, because we know that every vicious ruthless dictator of every fallen empire in history has made exactly those self-deluded claims.
- And we don't burn cats because we know that pain comes from the operation of our nervous systems, and that since other animals have brains similar to ours, they must feel pain as acutely as we do.

As Voltaire wrote, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities."

Even the more sentimental and emotional impulses that lead us to abjure cruelty may be rooted in the cosmopolitan literacy that a higher education fosters. History, journalism, anthropology, memoir, and fiction can make the inner lives of other people more palpable. They encourage us to put ourselves in their shoes, to imagine what it is like to be them, to appreciate that our own station in life is contingent and accidental -- to give us the feeling "there but for fortune go I". All of these make it harder to dehumanize, torture, or kill another human being.

Now, overcoming superstition, ignorance, and parochialism is not sufficient to reduce violence, but surely it is necessary. And that's why a university education, despite its costs, is a bargain for you and the humane society that pays for it. In the hope that the lifelong pursuit of knowledge and reason will make us all better as people, as a society, and as a species, I congratulate you on your achievement, and wish you happiness, fulfillment, and success in the years to come.