



Latvijas Republikas Valsts prezidenta kanceleja Prezidenta preses dienests

Pils laukums 3, Rīga-50, LV-1900, tālr. 7092122, fakss 7320404,
prese@president.lv, www.president.lv

Address by H.E. Dr. Vaira Vike-Freiberga, President of Latvia, At the University of McGill, Montreal

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.

Arriving there is what you're destined for.

But don't hurry the journey at all.

Better if it lasts for years, so you're old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you've gained along the way.

Ithaka by C.P. Cavafy

You, who stand here today, are about to embark on your own journey. None of you know how far you will have to wonder, nor what your ultimate destination will be. Will you sail smoothly throughout the years? Will angry Poseidon pursue you with his storms, blow you off course and place monsters in your way?

All you can count on for the journey is who and what you are as a person. Few of us know from birth that our destiny is to sit on a throne. None of us know in advance whether we will be elected president of a country, or sell insurance, be a rock star or a housewife, a millionaire or just a citizen struggling with our taxes. Even those born with the proverbial spoon in their mouth can be certain of nothing. War, revolution, financial crisis, family disaster may strip them of everything and leave them as naked and bereft as anyone else.

There is a story in Latvia about a brilliant society lady, a publishing millionnair of the thirties, who had angered a gypsy reputed to be a seer. He told her she should not be so proud and so haughty, for she would die of hunger and in his arms. She did, in Siberia, just a few years later, where they both got deported after the Soviet invasion of Latvia in 1940.

To-day, the 14th of June, is a day of mourning in Latvia, in remembrance of the deportations of 1941 which caused that lady and so many others to perish rich and poor, intellectual or farmer, Latvian, Gypsy, German or Jewish, men and women, babes in arms, children, teenagers, pregnant women about to give birth, old people on crutches or even on their deathbed. They were snatched from their beds in the middle of the night, given a half hour to pack, loaded into cattle cars, first of many waves of mass deportations under the Stalinist occupation.

In 1918, when Latvia became independent, my grandfathers generation thought the future at last was theirs. After many centuries of foreign rule, Latvians in the twenties and thirties of the past century had the opportunity at last to shape their own destinies and to feel that they could work hard not for others but for the sake of their own and their children's future.

But it was not to be. Hitler and Stalin signed a secret pact to split up their spheres of influence in Europe, the Second World War came with two occupations first the Soviet one and the Nazi one with the full horrors of the Holocaust, the Latvian soil drenched with the blood of innocent civilians. Then followed half a century behind the Iron Curtain, half a century of occupation and of forceful annexation into the Soviet Union. A young nation that had fought so valiantly for its freedom had been wiped off the map and there seemed little hope that it would ever regain its independence and its sovereignty.

My parents and those of my husband were among those who chose exile. While it meant losing everything they held dear, they felt that at least exile offered the dignity of remaining true to their beliefs, values and ideals. They always kept their faith in a free and independent Latvia, they struggled to preserve their identity, their language and their culture, even as fate tossed them from one continent to another, from one country to another. In Canada they found their haven of refuge, a place where they struggled and worked hard, but were able to rebuild a home away from home. That is why they chose Canada, not Latvia, to be their final resting place, for they had come to love the land that had accepted them as if they were its own.

When I grew up I felt it a heavy burden to have such a heritage. There were times when I felt resentful at my fate. It had robbed me of so much that is considered normal, it had set so many trials and difficulties in my path. During my teen-age years, there were moments of self-pity and of envy for what others had and I did not. But in my heart of hearts I always knew that I had what others did not my experience. And as the years went by, I came to accept that my life had been what it was meant to be, the good times and the bad. There was nothing to regret. I am a part of all that I have met and all that I have met has become part of me.

All of us start out naked on the journey of life, with our genes as our only inheritance. Then culture sets in, and family, and environment, and we get sent on our way with the strength of our character and the inner resources garnered from our upbringing, education and professional training.

None of us know when our fate will be to endure and when to triumph. Sometimes our biggest triumph will be merely to endure. Like it or not, we will know moments of pain, suffering, sorrow, loss, humiliation and failure, but we will also know moments of success and satisfaction, of joy, love, friendship, laughter, marvel, discovery and delight. Every person on earth has his or her own unique destiny.

Every person on earth has a unique mission to accomplish. It is our task in life to find out what our mission is, it is up to us to define the path that we alone were meant to follow. It is up to us, and to us alone, to give a sense and meaning to our lives, no matter what the circumstances, no matter that the winds of fate seem to blow us out of our way.

You stand here today, graduates of McGill, where once I stood, as did my husband Imants, my son Karlis and my daughter Indra. We all share a debt of deep gratitude to a great institution, a place of world-class, cutting edge research, a centre of higher learning, a beacon of reason, culture and humanity in a world fighting against ignorance, prejudice, violence and chaos. We have been fortunate in obtaining the best education anyone could wish for. You have been fortunate in being as prepared for the world as anyone could be, and I feel particularly honoured and grateful for the Honorary Degree that that has been given to me by Alma Mater today.

Myself, after a long journey, I find that my fate, that I had thought cruel, has been kind to me. I have been able to return to the shores of my native sea. I have been elected head of my native country, now independent again, a country that has recovered its democratic institutions, a civil society, a free market economy and openness to the world. It is a particular privilege to be at its helm at a time of crucial historical changes, a turning point in history which will give us a Europe far greater than it has ever been in its history. Latvia stands poised and ready to be invited to join both the NATO alliance and the European Union at the end of this very year 2002. Latvia stands ready to work hard for its future, to compete with the best and to collaborate with all who hold the same values, ideals and aspirations.

Some of you here today will remain in Canada, others will scatter to the far corners of the world. All of you will take with you the sense of supreme striving, fair play and of responsibility that to me is the essence of a McGill education. To you, who set out on your journey, I offer my best wishes and warm congratulations. May your life be a blessing to

yourself and to all that you work for. May you all find your destination but most of all may you remember that the journey itself is the destination, that every day of your life is truly your own to savour, to use and enjoy. God bless you all.