

Convocation Address September 2004

Governor Douglas, Mayor Clavelle, President Sanders, Chairman Pizzagalli, members of the Board of Trustees, faculty, staff, students, and friends of the University, it is my great pleasure to welcome you all to what promises to be a momentous year in the life of the University and, I hope, a rewarding and energizing year in the life of every member of the campus community. As Mr. Pizzagalli has remarked, we are setting off together on a new academic year at a time of great change and excitement for UVM, united in our determination to establish this wonderful school as the nation's premier small public research university and to ensure that our students are challenged to be active learners in a deeply engaging environment for learning and personal development.

Convocation is a celebratory occasion. But while we rejoice in the fresh departures and high hopes represented by the beginning of the new academic year, we are at the same time saddened knowing that a beloved and admired colleague, Joan Smith, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, is departing this life, still radiant after a nine-year battle with cancer throughout which she served the faculty, students, and staff of the College with great distinction and devotion. Our thoughts are with her and her family this afternoon.

And beyond this personal loss—which is a grievous institutional loss at the same time—we hear throughout our nation and the world what William Wordsworth called “the still, sad music of humanity,” the resonance of suffering and loss reverberating to us from the scenes of devastation and death in the wake of Hurricane Frances in Georgia and Florida, from the bedsides of victims of AIDS around the world, from the battlefields of Afghanistan and Iraq and the killing fields of Sudan, from the deaths of countless in-

nocents in those theaters of fierce destruction, from the victims of terror, and their survivors, in New York and Washington, in Israel and Palestine, in Moscow and Saudi Arabia, in Bali and Spain, from the mourners who in dazed incomprehension visit and revisit the site of lethal terror at the school in Beslan, Russia.

As we know all too well, this catalogue of the sufferings of humanity could be extended almost *ad infinitum*. With the loss of a dear colleague, and with the tragic spectacles of death and destruction around the world, compounded by so many human activities destructive of the planet itself, the preciousness of life is brought home to us with poignant force, and we remember the stunning exhortation of Moses in *Deuteronomy*, “I have set before you this day life and death, the blessing and the curse: therefore choose life.”

Feeling the burden of the mystery, that we are making our way through a world of heartbreak, disease, suffering, and loss, and yet that we have in each of us the power to choose life, we commit ourselves to living as fully and as well as possible, and we know that we are among the most privileged and fortunate of our fellow creatures in being members of a community devoted to discovery, to intellectual and personal growth, and to the acquisition of knowledge and skills that will enable us to teach and to create, to heal and to mitigate suffering, and to make common cause with others for the betterment of our communities, of all of the inhabitants of the earth, and of the earth itself.

I can think of no institution that rivals the modern university in the potential it affords to all whose lives it touches to live those lives fully and to make a difference in the world. So let us, at the beginning of the new academic year, resolve—each of us individually, and all of us collectively—to make the most of the enviable opportunities we

have for living fully, for savoring the life of the mind as passionately as we can, for seizing our chances for intellectual and personal growth with a vivid sense of how rare and special they are, and for fulfilling the obligation to give back, to serve others, that our privilege entails.

I want to extend a special welcome to our students, and especially to those who are new to the University of Vermont. To each of you, I say that your opportunity and obligation to live fully in the life of the University means taking advantage of every opportunity to learn and to grow; means being an active participant in the adventures of the mind and spirit you will find here; means respecting yourselves, each other, and our neighbors in the community around us, not degrading yourselves or each other, and taking good care—good care—of yourselves and of your fellow students. You are heirs to a more than two-hundred-year-old tradition of high distinction among the students of UVM, ranging from nineteenth-century graduates like John Dewey, America's greatest philosopher of education, and George Washington Henderson, ranked first in the class of 1877 and the first African-American in the nation to be admitted to Phi Beta Kappa, to twentieth-century graduates like Jody Williams, class of '72, winner of the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize for leading the international Campaign Against Land Mines, like 1978 graduate Jon Kilik, producer of many of the nation's most challenging independent films, from Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing*, through *American History X* and *Dead Man Walking*, to *Basquiat* and *Pollock*, like another 1978 graduate, John McGill, who received his M.D. that year from the UVM College of Medicine and who, two years after Jody Williams, was another UVMer on the receiving end of the Nobel Peace Prize as President of the American section of Doctors Without Borders, and like 1988 graduate Eric Lipton, a

New York *Times* reporter and winner of the Pulitzer Prize for explanatory journalism. Members of the Class of 2008, welcome to a great and distinguished line of students. We look to you to carry on the UVM traditions of high achievement and of service to the world. We expect great things of you, and we call on you to demand great things of yourselves.

For our faculty and staff, the obligation to live as fully as possible in the life of the University means a personal commitment to doing our work as well as we possibly can; means, first and foremost, working to create for our students and for ourselves an environment that genuinely supports learning and discovery as our central activities; means supporting the University's core values, its commitments to intellectual liberty, environmental stewardship, diversity, equity, social justice, and service to society in the grand Land Grant tradition we joyfully embrace; means being engaged in our chosen disciplines as scholars, scientists, and creative artists at the highest levels; but means, at the same time, being active participants in the broad life of the institution, entering into dialogue with colleagues in a wide variety of disciplines, pursuing cross-cutting programs of teaching, research, and service, and making connections between disparate areas of knowledge, even as we lead our students to do so as well in our shared belief that breadth of understanding, the ability to connect and to subject ideas to rigorous scrutiny and testing through multiple lenses—through a variety of ways of understanding, interpreting, and synthesizing knowledge—is the very heart of a liberal arts education, the key to preparing our wonderful students to be leaders in a rapidly changing and challenging world. The fulfillment of these imperatives calls for superlative ability and exemplary character in our faculty and staff, ability and character that we find to be abundant among our col-

leagues, and that we intend to reward more than ever before, including the establishment of new University award programs to recognize and celebrate excellence and distinguished achievement.

Many people throughout the UVM family—faculty, staff, students, alumni, friends, trustees—have been deeply engaged over the course of the past two years in the development of a boldly ambitious vision of what this University can become as the nation's leading environmental University, as a center of innovative and challenging liberal education, as a leader in the health and biomedical sciences, as an indispensable contributor to the educational, cultural, intellectual, social, and economic well-being of the State of Vermont, as a force for the advancement of knowledge throughout the world, as an environment replete with the support and resources faculty and staff need as they work to achieve the lofty station we have envisioned together for UVM, and above all as a site where students are challenged to engage actively in unusually rewarding educational experiences.

We are now engaged in executing that vision. The campus is undergoing physical transformations that will alter the fabric of campus life and community in fundamental ways, from the ongoing work on the recently acquired Trinity Campus to freshly renovated and new residence halls, to renovated classroom and laboratory buildings and to new ones as well, and to the state-of-the-art student center that we hope to open well in advance of the graduation of this fall's first-year students. The evolution of the physical campus will unfold within the framework of a campus master plan that will be completed in the course of this new academic year. At the same time, we have embarked on a program of carefully limited and amply supported enrollment growth, with the key elements

of support including new student housing that will add more beds than UVM will be adding students and, most importantly, new faculty to maintain the human scale we achieve here through low student faculty ratios—eighty new tenure-track faculty as an essential feature of the enrollment growth plan, augmented by fifty more new faculty brought into UVM to help drive the growth of our research enterprise.

Our plan, successfully executed, will provide resources sufficient to achieve these things, but make no mistake. It is not about bricks and mortar, and it is not about numbers of students, faculty, and staff. As we have said many times, those physical and quantifiable aspects of the plan represent the necessary means to the essential ends for which we are working. The ends lie in the domain of academic excellence—superb educational experiences for students, a supportive place in which to teach, learn, discover, create, and serve for faculty and staff, and innovative, outstanding programs that prepare our students to do what we aim to do ourselves, to be leaders who make a difference in their professions and in the organizations and communities they will serve throughout their lives and work.

The academic vision for UVM will evolve over time, being shaped and reshaped by successive generations of alumni, students, staff, and above all by the faculty. This year we are seeking your full engagement in the shaping of that vision, around these five questions that we posed to the campus in an email broadcast in early July.

- What must we do to establish UVM as a leading center of innovative liberal arts education in the 21st century?

- What must we do in our instructional programs, in our research and scholarship, and in our institutional practices to make good on our claim of being the nation's environmental university?
- To what niche areas within the vast domain of health, medicine, and the life sciences should we commit differential resources in order to establish programs that are the very best in the world?
- What steps must we take to ensure that the University fully realizes its promise as the key driver of Vermont's bid to establish a viable, productive, and prosperous position in the global economy?
- How do we align everything we do behind the need to offer an exceptional educational experience to our students, at a University of high academic quality with an efficient, service-oriented approach to supporting our people and activities?

In a moment I will ask Senior Vice President and Provost John Bramley to step forward to set the stage for the year-long dialogue we hope to promote on these questions. Let me simply note before closing that nothing surpasses in its centrality and importance the last of these questions: How do we align everything we do behind the need to offer an exceptional educational experience to our students? Our new Honors College already shows promise of creating great intellectual excitement across the disciplines for all of members of the campus community, invigorating the academic culture for faculty as well as students. In the past two years, through the hard work of the Faculty Senate, we have created new, integrated blueprints for the study of the biological and environmental sciences, breaking down unnecessary barriers that have not always made it easy for students to access the resources of the University across the boundaries of our various colleges and

schools. A great deal of vital activity is under way aimed at the creation of new interdisciplinary graduate programs and cross-cutting research opportunities. It is my fervent hope that together this year we will create two enduring and distinguishing features of excellence in undergraduate education in every discipline of the University. The first of these signatures of excellence and of coherence in the meaning of a UVM education would lie in a very rich array of opportunities for experiential learning in the tradition of John Dewey, whether through field experiences such as student teaching, social work agency placements, and clinical rotations, or through undergraduate research experiences, or through internships and co-ops, or through the continuing expansion and enhancement of our Service-Learning programs. The second would be to create a campus-wide undergraduate degree requirement that will cultivate excellence in written communication as a distinguishing mark of educated women and men preparing for lives of service and leadership. We cannot relegate this effort to teachers of first-year English. The only way to ensure that students improve as writers throughout their college careers is to engage them in writing year after year in every discipline in the University. That is why we will strongly encourage and support efforts, through the Faculty Senate, to promote writing across the disciplines at UVM and to establish an undergraduate degree requirement for sustained engagement in writing.

We know that our student leaders are supportive of these objectives, and I call upon our faculty and staff also to commit to these signatures of educational excellence at UVM as signs of our will to live as fully as possible in the life of the University. Nothing should sharpen our appetite for doing so as much as our consciousness that time is passing, that life is infinitely precious, and that the choice for life lies before us as a great

ethical imperative. Such, I think, is the drift of these lines from Emily Dickinson, which seem especially appropriate on this inclement September day:

September's Baccalaureate

A combination is

Of Crickets -- Crows -- and Retrospects

And a dissembling Breeze

That hints without assuming --

An Innuendo sear

That makes the Heart put up its Fun

And turn Philosopher.

Professor Gurdon . . .