

THE IMPERATIVE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

feature address by

V. ADRIAN AUGIER
(BA UWO, MA AU, Hon DLitt UWI)

on the occasion of the

CEREMONY FOR THE PRESENTATION OF UWI OPEN CAMPUS GRADUATES

Frigate Bay - St. Kitts

13.10.12



Dr. Adrian Augier presents the Graduation Address to the gathering at the 2012 UWI Open Campus Graduation in St. Kitts & Nevis.

Salutations!

To be honoured in this way, by this esteemed academic community, is to receive profound affirmation that the work one has done and hopes to continue, is both relevant and worthy. For this, I will remain deeply grateful to the Chancellor, the Senate and the Council of this University.

I must confess that I am particularly pleased with the timing of this gesture, being not so fond of posthumous accolades - especially for myself.

Moreover, to be asked to address this class of 2012 is a further honour which I accepted, because it is unwise to refuse such a request from someone who knew you when you were a babbling adolescent.

Professor Hazel Simmons Mc Donald, now Pro-Vice Chancellor and Principal of the UWI Open Campus, taught me literature some 30 years ago in St. Lucia. It is heart warming to know that she remains so proud of me, **and** that she will be held partly responsible for any inept poetry inflicted upon you in the course of this address.

Incidentally, I have never before donned the gown and cap, nor walked the hallowed path to actually receive a diploma. This could be because, on a deeply felt point of principle, I led a boycott of what would have been my A' Level graduation ceremony. After that, all other diplomas arrived by mail. So this is truly a first and indeed, a very special moment in my life.

Notwithstanding its huge significance, I do not think this conferment will change me a great deal. In the recent words of the First Lady of the United States: High office **reveals** rather than **transforms** who you are.

(Michelle could not be here this morning... but would welcome your support in November. In the meantime, Linda my wife, my mother, aunt and dearest friends are with me, and I must take a moment to say how thankful I am for their presence and support.)

What this Honorary Doctorate will undoubtedly do, is reinforce the often overwhelming sense of responsibility under which I labour, hoping for change, enlightenment and improvement in the world which I inhabit. Abraham Lincoln put it reasonably well when he said:

**I have an irrepressible desire to live
till I can be assured that the world is a little better
for my having lived in it.**

As we know, Lincoln became president, won the civil war, ended slavery, and for his troubles was assassinated in 1865. Fortunately, my ambitions are not quite as grand.

But closer to home and heart, I do believe that most Caribbean people know that a worthy and rewarding life is seldom just about our individual needs. I think we know that our sense of community and shared responsibility binds us and builds us, in ways that other cultures may have long forgotten. This excerpt from the title poem of *Navel String* explains:

**When we were young and poor and wise
and still held each other in each other's eyes
and forced for want of means
to share alike each others' joys and miseries,
we marked each birth by planting navel strings.**

**And lacking alternative device,
erected trees, great branching memories,
to bless the spot**

**where to more abundant life
we bound ourselves**

**mere shrivelling flesh
proffered to eternal earth
rock to sinew,
root to bone and so forever
to this hopeful place.**

**It would have to do, this new-island soil
however small and shallow but not without
its blessing of our blood. The rivulets of mud
at least will redden when the late rains come
remembering us to home.**

*Adrian Augier; Navel String
World Festival of Black Art and Culture
Dakar Senegal: 2010*

Notwithstanding such innate knowledge of our beginnings, I think we too are in danger of forgetting that this **higher education** which shapes minds and lives and so our future, must also reinforce our dedication to that great enterprise which is Caribbean society.

Unless we hold firm to that cause we will be overrun: by the ethics of convenience, the economics of scarcity, the politics of expedience and our own blind and unbridled materialism.

That development model - whose offspring include crime, poverty, violence, ignorance and corruption - is patently unsuitable to our needs and circumstances and has not worked anywhere in the world. So, if **“higher”** education is to count for anything, we must resist the hopeless passivity, and have the audacity to design a better way for ourselves and our children.

No doubt the University is painfully aware that there is a shift in the constitution of students entering its walls; aware that primary and secondary education processes are de-emphasizing Caribbean literature, history, civics, geography, and linguistics. In other words, de-emphasizing the humanities - that which makes us human - in favour of such practical subjects as principles of accounting and principles of business, which are all very good, but which do not give us any sense of who we are in this wonderful global marketplace.

I suspect I am not alone in this impression that we are in danger of forgetting that this Caribbean of ours was built, diligently one generation at a time, stone upon stone, hand upon hand and that:

**Lacking certain options
our people eased off the yoke
of ignorance and dependency
by leveraging their labour and some land**

**And rose out of that regimented soil
with its settled strata
and intimately held themselves together
with the kind of dignity that poverty
and missing options must impose**

**In our little island theatre
we became the leads;
characters in the dramas of our own lives
and managed to love and prove
that size held no dominion
over determination.**

*Adrian Augier; Urban Drift
Carifesta IX, Trinidad: 2006*

Given our unprecedented accomplishments in art, sport, science, politics, economics, medicine, engineering and so many other fields, the diminution of our communal sense of responsibility - our collective ethos - is the thing that most confounds me about contemporary Caribbean society. It distorts individual ambition, familial relationships, community consciousness, nation building and regionalism in ways that are anathema to our very survival.

Sir Hilary Beckles, in a recent Emancipation Lecture delivered in St. Lucia, spoke passionately about the striking incongruity between our historical experience and our current development models.

The venerable George Lamming writes about the “Sovereignty of the Imagination” and in the words of Anthony Brogues

**“...beckons us to toward the constructive use
of this potential in building Caribbean society.**

*Anthony Brogues;
Professor of Africana Studies and Political Science
Brown University* Lamming himself warns:

The way we see, the way we hear, our nurtured sense of touch and smell, the whole complex of feelings which we call sensibility, is influenced by the particular features of the landscape that has been humanized by our work...”

*George Lamming;
Sovereignty of the Imagination*

Economist Amartya Sen, winner of the 1998 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences, has written extensively about welfare economics and social choice, linking development and freedom as twin parameters of development.

Our own Laureate, Sir Arthur Lewis laid for us a sound theoretical foundation which we seem to have abandoned, and to paraphrase the Honourable Derek Walcott, who speaking of the great potential of the Caribbean:

If there is nothing here, then there is everything to be built.

So we have a wealth of wisdom from which to draw. But that wisdom is daunted by a colossal lack of cohesion: the sort that allows governments to postpone their contributions to this very institution.

As an artist – literally running out of time - I have to hope for enlightenment. I choose to believe that better can be done. As an economist, I know that there is cause and effect, cost and benefit, risk and

return. But I cannot set aside the imperative that we must continue to evolve not just as markets and economies but as societies.

For this to happen, there must be an enduring vision as well as the sustainable means to bring it about. Surely this is not beyond us. There is enough human capital in this room alone to achieve that end. We must believe that we can do this, and so I am challenging our leading institutions, to stand above the narrow exigencies of small-island politics and initiate a powerful dialogue which meaningfully addresses our future as a Caribbean Society.

And I will name these institutions: The University of the West Indies - repository of our wisdom; the Eastern Caribbean Central Bank - repository of our wealth; the Caribbean Development Bank – repository of our development resources; CARICOM and the OECS - custodians of our integration movement; the regional private sector and labour movements.

Let us suspend our disbelief long enough to rewrite the script that is shaping the future of this region. Let us move to action so that within the next twelve months, before another graduation passes, our best minds and bodies will meet to review this tenuous path which we are on.

In other words, let us give our graduands a fighting chance. And you Graduands, should accept no less. You deserve to live in the best of possible worlds. So do not merely busy yourselves with the pursuit of a job, a car loan and a mortgage.

While seeking your individual fortunes, you must also use your talents, your determination, your youthful energy to help create that space which is worthy of us all: a Caribbean society which reflects individual and collective wisdom, our creative energies, and the unlimited potential of this our only Caribbean home.

Let us show the world that we can truly be *Oriens Ex Occidente Lux* - A Light Rising from the West.

In closing, I must thank my fellow honouree, Dr Lennox Honeychurch for his kind and generous words of tribute last night at the Principal's Dinner. By pure coincidence, he quoted from the same poem I had chosen as the epilogue to this address. I now offer you that piece in full. I hope it lingers in your mind and provokes us all to action:

IT'S A HARD THING

**It's hard thing
to live without passion
in a place that is part of you
to stay all level-headed
when you feel
the wind like it's
your own hot breath**

It's a hard thing

**When you know a place so well
that you can tell from the smell
inside the damp wood house
and the dark drumming on the zinc roof
that august rain falling heavy like a rake**

and ripping 'way your skin
from the very surface of the earth.

It's a hard thing

When in dry season
you see all the soil crack-up
like a big brown heart that split apart
and all the happiness that come
from loving green leaf
and bubbling spring
done gone and evaporate into air.

It's a hard thing

To stay all cool and comfortable
and smile for people who you know
would mash up a place that is your home
since before you born
because three generations before you
struggle, struggle, struggle
till they buy a house

And land, together,
and get to own the place
that their great-grandfather
used to rent
but could never buy
in his one life
before he die.

It's a hard thing

Not to cry, when this place is part of you
as much as the hand that hold the pen
to write this thing, that same pen
that your godfather give you
when you pass for college,
that pen with its deep dark ink
that flow like a bloodline from it.

It's a hard thing

And you would know
because there must be a dose
of shame or hope or something else
inside you there, beside this craving
for a longtime day
when we used to understand
that history is not what people tell us

**But part of who we are:
deep-thinking people
determined to tell our story
under moonlit mango tree
or street lamp or in painting, or our poetry
or in that sweeter music that used to come
bubbling up from down inside a place**

**Where we were not, like now, afraid to go.
Because we owe a debt, a loyalty
to this landscape that sustain us,
this earth that raise you, raise me
and should make you ask ancestors
if it is alright to cut down a tree
that is older than you**

**Because somebody navel string
might be buried under there.
It's a hard thing.**

*Adrian Augier:
Navel String*

Ladies and Gentlemen, I thank you.