

Feature Address delivered by Angela Cropper to Humanities and Education Graduating Students at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad

Chairperson; Dean of the Faculty Dr. Ian Robertson; Principal of the Campus Dr. Bhoendradatt Tewarie; Other persons on the podium; Members of staff; Graduating students and Prize winners; Distinguished guests; Ladies and Gentlemen.

May I begin by thanking the Faculty for honoring me with an invitation to present the Feature Address at this Prize Award Ceremony. I am so pleased to be here to share this moment with these high performers! I congratulate the students for the choice they have made to pursue their course of education in the Faculty of Humanities and Education, and for their achievements which we are celebrating this evening.

I have been asked to speak on the topic "Our Students: Creators and Custodians of our Culture". I have also been very helpfully supplied by the Faculty with a quotation from the work of Cultural Anthropologist Margaret Mead for preparation of my address: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." Happily, I am very familiar with this quotation and with Dr. Mead's work: I have myself used that very quotation to motivate an International Conference on 'Development as if Equity Mattered' which was organized by the Cropper Foundation in September 2001. I often use this quotation for motivating myself and others; and I hope that you, graduating students and prize winners, will also use it in that way, especially if you are disposed to give some further thought to what I will lay at your feet this evening.

The concept of creators and custodians of our culture is not only intriguing; it is complex, wide-ranging, potentially far-reaching, and certainly demanding. It is also fundamental to the future of Trinidad and Tobago and Caribbean society, and to the way in which we contribute to, and engage with, the global civilization of which we are a part. For the concept implies that we can create and sustain the kind of culture we wish to have. It is an active proposition. It implies conscious choice and commitment.

We know that the concept of culture is understood at difference levels. Perhaps the most ready and popular view of culture is as the performing arts. Culture is also understood as the amalgam of customs, rituals, festival, festivities and other forms of expression by which a group or society comes to be recognized and distinguished from others. Understood in this way, our culture reveals a diversity of origins, rituals, and customs that underpin the way we are, and the way we live and relate to others and the world around us. These manifestations make us recognizably different from others, whether as groups within societies or between societies: "You are; therefore I am" (Title of book by Satish Kumar). Culture is also understood as the body of intellectual achievements of a particular time or people.

But this evening I want to look at culture as a way of being – an accumulation of attitudes, values and behaviour, that may have both destructive and affirmative facets, and which may be passed on from generation to generation. I take my bearings here from the work of the United Nations World Commission on Culture and Development which in its Report of 2002 held out the view of culture as 'the last frontier of development', and discussed Culture as "the set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of society or a social group, and that it encompasses, in addition to art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions and beliefs."

With that in mind, I intend this evening to try and crystallize what may be some facets of our way of being in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean as a whole, facets which I think all groups manifest, irrespective of their origins and the rituals and forms of expression by which they are distinguished one from the other. Some of these facets have been with us for a long time, others are emergent [becoming apparent]. These are perhaps characteristics of our Caribbean culture which unify us – more than those things to which we often lay claim – though they may be present to different degrees in the various societies. In the short time I have I can only draw these out and leave you to examine them further in the course of your work as creators and custodians of our culture. And after your own analysis I would be happy if I am proved to be wrong about any of them.

Culture of Materialism

The first facet that I want to draw out is our emergent culture of materialism. This seems to be our dominant ethic, not limited to the Caribbean, of course. It may be that we are led along in this by others, and not having the confidence to formulate and position our own world view in contradistinction, we allow this to become a dominant facet of our own culture, willingly adopted, not resisted. Our capitulation is reinforced by official endorsement that the monetary value of the product we generate is the ultimate measure of our progress and achievement and development as societies. This measure is the dominant one in Trinidad & Tobago's 20/20 Vision. Here, that is in T&T, we have become part of the extractive mindset of the industrial order, with no concern about sustainability, and little regard for inter-generational equity. We are scornful of the notion that humanity must harmonise its demands with Earth's capacities. And our materialism is leading us to become disconnected from our physical place and from one another.

Culture of Individualism

Then I want to draw attention to our culture of individualism. Each person for herself; 'me' at the expense of the 'other', breakdown of the authority and stability of family, school, community; and scant regard for the value of those relationships for creating and sustaining the social order.

Culture of Civic Complacency

Third, our culture of civic complacency is evident in so many ways, perhaps because of our preoccupation with material progress, compounded by the culture of individualism. We take laissez-faire into new realms. What are the implications of this for our culture of democracy? I hasten to put in the balance here that Caribbean societies seem to have the ability to occasionally rise out of a complacent stupor and say 'enough is enough'. We are familiar with those historical moments: from slave uprisings throughout the Caribbean to the revolution of the Black Jacobins in Haiti, to the march of 1935 led by Uriah Butler on behalf of downtrodden workers; to the assault on Chaguaramas in 1960 led by Eric Williams to reclaim our patrimony; to the stirrings of 1970 in search of equity and national identity; and to the march of last weekend to put to death our culture of complacency. We do have that capacity to rise up as a body politic and let our voice be heard, and to rescue ourselves from our 5-yearly caricature of democracy, but we do not often bestir ourselves to do so. There are, however, some blocks upon which to build a new culture of Caribbean citizenship.

Culture of Violence

Fourth is our culture of violence, which is emerging as a dominant characteristic throughout the Caribbean. Violence has been a longstanding aspect of political, family and gender relations in the Caribbean; but it is now becoming the routine means for dealing with even inconsequential conflicts; it is the tool of the culture of materialism, and it is felling a culture of criminality.

Culture of Corruption

Fifth is the culture of corruption. In Trinidad and Tobago we take pride in finding loopholes or getting around regulations, or evading the law. The longstanding perception of the "Trickidadian" by our Caribbean compatriots is not without some basis. This facet of our culture reveals itself in some national gems: "no damn dog bark"; "all ah we tief"; "politics has its own morality". These statements have become emblematic. No doubt they have their equivalent in other Caribbean countries.

Culture of Half-arsed-ness

And there is the Caribbean tendency to do only as little as would get us by; to go for cosmetic rather than fundamental changes; and though we make many claims, it is perhaps only in the Arts and Sports that we can be said to have manifested a culture of excellence. As an example of this I invite you to look at our attempt to make the city of Port of Spain user-friendly to Spanish speaking visitors, as part of the campaign to woo the Headquarters of the Free Trade Area of the Americas: you will see that some street signs have been rendered in Spanish, but they are very few and limited in range. I often wonder if this reveals an intention to confine our Spanish-reading visitors to a few blocks in the city. No doubt we have indulged in this tokenism because this is very easy to do; much easier than transforming the dump that is Port of Spain, or relocating the health and environmental nuisance that is the Beetham Landfill. I had to coin a word to describe this tendency. It's not in the literature. I call it the culture of half-arsed-ness. I think we can find examples of this throughout the Caribbean.

Culture of Nihilism

The above facets all seem to accumulate towards an absence of feelings, of value for non-material aspects of life and relationships; a disregard for moral principles; and absence of soul. And I wonder if we are not seeing the setting in of a culture of nihilism. Just when we need a culture of caring, a culture of compassion; just when we need to regain relationships of family and community as pathways to healing; just when we need to reinstate a foundation of moral principles to guide personal, public and political behaviour.

To the students: I am sure that you would not want to be custodians of facets of our culture such as those that I have suggested. But if you are also creators of our culture, what might be the nature of your contribution to examination and displacement of these facets, and to cultivation of different values and patterns in our societies, that would at the same time help us overcome the disharmony, disintegration, and dysfunction that we see around us?

You will have a big responsibility to decide which of our cultural attributes are worthy of being sustained. This selection process will have to be predicated on some framework of values, in the larger context of the character of Caribbean society that we might work towards, as well as the character of the global civilization to which we would want to contribute. Lloyd Best often says that our elite groups have failed Caribbean societies, because they have not taken the responsibility to catalyze the kind of processes that the societies need. Providing leadership in initiating such processes of reflection and self-examination, catalyzing public process, facilitating analysis, and building consensus about the way forward: all this falls to you now as one of those elite groups in the society. And perhaps as graduated in Humanities and Education, you will see yourself as agents of cultural change, including change in our self-view, for that is basic to making any change at an individual, group, societal or regional level. Our self-view is basic to the concept of culture that I have advanced here. Moreover, in this interconnected and interdependent world, it is useful to also cultivate a culture of universalism; but the more globalised we become, the more we need to feel secure in ourselves, in our group identity, if we as Caribbeans are to engage with confidence in the complex, impersonal global village.

As University graduates, you will no doubt bring to bear your trained analytical minds in examining these issues more deeply. You will have the wherewithal to lead us in a process of transformation, to transcend what is undesirable, to achieve a more balanced way of organizing our social, economic, political, aesthetic and moral affairs, and to enhance the character of our Caribbean.

I think the above seven facets I have suggested are well summed up in a piece of writing of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, which I shall share with you. It is entitled 'The Paradox of our Age'.

He writes:

We have bigger houses, but smaller families;
 more conveniences, but less time.
 We have more degrees, but less sense;
 more knowledge, but less judgement;
 more medicines but less healthiness.
 We've been all the way to the moon and back,
 but we have trouble crossing the street to meet the new neighbours.
 We have built more computers to hold more information,
 to produce more copies than ever,
 but we have less communication.
 We have become long on quantity,
 but short on quality.
 These are the times of fast foods but slow digestion.
 Tall man but short character;
 steep profits but shallow relationships.
 It is a time when there is much in the window,
 but nothing in the room.
(Resurgence, March/April 2005, p. 13)

We look to you, graduating students, to occupy that space, to inhabit that empty room, to furnish and equip it, and to invite us to reflect on our way of being. And this is how the quotation of Margaret Mead becomes relevant to you: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can..." To be sure this is a very difficult move to make. You may not succeed in making the change during your tenure or even during your lifetime, for it may now require a generation or two; but you might begin to give substance to the hope within us that we may be able to renovate our fractured but fertile place.

For, as Vaclav Havel has written:

"Either we have hope within us or we do not. It is a dimension of the soul and is not necessarily dependent on some particular observation of the world. Hope is an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart. It transcends the world that is immediately experienced and is anchored somewhere beyond its horizons. It is...an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance of succeeding... [Hope] is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense regardless of how it turns out. It is Hope, above all, which gives the strength to live and continually try new things."
(Web of Hope. Resurgence 219, July/August 2003: quoting Havel in 1990 writing).

And so I leave you, students, with these points of view for your own exploration. As you take your own person and professional direction, and begin to seek the pathways to it, you may find useful what the Chinese philosopher Lu Hsun has written:

Hope cannot be said to exist, nor cannot be said not to exist.
 It is just like the roads across the earth.
 For actually there were no roads to begin with,
 But when many people pass one way, a road is made.
(Lu Hsun, 1921 in Resurgence No. 219, July/August 2003).

The concept of creators and custodians of our culture is not only intriguing; it is complex, wide-ranging, potentially far-reaching, and certainly demanding. It is also fundamental to the future of Trinidad and Tobago and Caribbean society, and to the way in which we contribute to, and engage with, the global civilization of which we are a part. For the concept implies that we can create and sustain the kind of culture we wish to have. It is an active proposition. It implies conscious choice and commitment.

I extend my best wishes for success in your undertakings. I thank you. And may you have Peace.