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Honorary Doctor of Laws

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Let me start by making one thing very clear. I am not going to be funny. Trying to seem funny next to Rick Mercer is impossible. It's like trying to seem dull next to Stephen Harper.

I want to thank the Brock Senate for extending this honour to me and to Rick. And I want to congratulate all of today's graduates. For some of you, further education may beckon – but for many, you have now been unleashed into the world of careers and adult lives.

Now what?

As graduates in the health sciences, you know the tremendous progress that's been made over the last few decades in our knowledge and understanding of our world. You can imagine the innovations that lie ahead – the potential of science to improve and protect lives.

Perhaps this is your path.

However you choose to go forward, there will be challenges. But there will also be opportunities – chances to make a real difference, chances to help bring change, reduce misery, improve fortunes. To those who seek to be a positive force, there is no shortage of places to start – around the corner and around the world.

In 2006, Rick and I had the honour of traveling in Africa with Dr. Jeffrey Sachs. Many of you will be familiar with Jeff's work. He's an economist, a special advisor to the UN Secretary-General and he's the author of a number of books, including *The End of Poverty*.

We visited Kenya, Uganda, Rwanda, Djibouti and Ethiopia. I won't ever forget the time I spent there, nor the people I met. We saw material poverty at its worst, and human hope at its best.

We listened as young children spoke of friends and siblings who had died at the hands of malaria.

The statistics tell us that what we're witnessing is nothing less than another lost generation of African youth – millions killed at such an early age.

Yet these kids were so matter-of-fact about it. Simply, tragically, this disease and the toll it takes are a part of their daily lives.

As we traveled, I was inspired as well by Jeff's passionate belief that citizens can make a real difference, no matter how big or small their number, no matter how huge or complex the challenge.

And I was reminded of something that June Callwood had once said. "If any of you happens to see an injustice, you are no longer a spectator, you are a participant. And you have an obligation to do something."

As you all know, Rick is gifted when it comes to satire. In some ways, pessimism is his day job. But it turns out he's an optimist by night.

He and I joined together to launch Spread the Net – an organization dedicated to the purchase and delivery of protective bed nets to African families.

We did so with the help of UNICEF. And we did so to follow as Jeff Sachs's disciples – to make a difference, and to help and encourage others to do the same.

Spread the Net has been a big success – a success that has been built one person and one donation at a time.

We're not a huge organization – we're modest in size. No big bureaucracy.

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We don't promise to change the world – we promise to take your \$10 and use it to deliver an insecticide-treated bed net to a family in Rwanda or Liberia. So far we've been able to donate more than 370,000 nets. That's a lot of people protected, and a lot of lives saved.

Part of the thrill of being involved in a grassroots effort like ours is the satisfaction you feel when others embrace the cause. And they've been doing so with such passion.

Malaria is a brutal disease. It's painful and it kills.

Yet even given the huge scope of the challenge at hand, people are motivated by this campaign – by the idea of “action” being so closely connected with “reaction.”

What I mean by that is the net itself has come to be perceived as both a tool and a symbol – a practical tool for shielding a family from the mosquitoes that transmit the disease; and a powerful symbol of the tangible benefits of charitable work.

We can hold up the net and say, “You – all by yourself – you can save a life.

“You don't need a massive organization. You don't need Bill Gates' money.

“You make a modest donation. The money buys a net. The net is delivered to a family. The family sleeps in safety.”

Investing in malaria prevention and treatment works as a cold, hard business analysis.

But to me what will always be most important is that it works on the level of common sense and human decency.

In your lifetimes, we've seen the influence of the individual rise – not only as contributors to philanthropic causes, but as a force in pressuring governments and businesses to pursue social justice.

For instance, using the Internet as a tool, the people behind the ONE campaign have been able to amass a multi-million-member army of anti-poverty activists, raising the issue at the highest possible political level based solely on sheer will and impressive numbers.

Today, we are all empowered through technology to contribute directly to the lives of people not only in our community but around the world.

A few clicks on a computer and we can be buying a goat for a village in Africa. With a donation of as little as \$25 through the website Kiva.org, they can become a banker to the poor: helping a micro-entrepreneur in a developing country to start a small business.

Not long ago I was in Haiti. I traveled with Wyclef Jean and his cousin Jerry Duplessis – or Jerry Wonder, as he's known.

Jerry and I were walking through Cite Soleil, a slum in Port-au-Prince that is home to a million people. No sewers, little electricity, few police.

Jerry was born in Haiti. This was a place familiar to him.

And as we walked past people whose very struggle to survive consumed the better part of their lives, Jerry was both distressed for these people and inspired by them.

He said to me: “The most powerful force in nature is the strength of the human spirit.”

That strength must be nurtured. And it can only be nurtured if each of us strives to make a difference. That's why I recently launched my own charitable foundation. It builds on the Spread the Net. It's dedicated to advancing human potential and achievement through individual empowerment and social change.

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We live in a society that seems to grow more fragmented every day. Our lives are busier. Friendships are harder to maintain. For some, families are harder to hold together – or even to get together for dinner.

The world grows more crowded, technology grows more ubiquitous, and yet there are times we feel increasingly alone. We need to work harder to feel part of something, to make a contribution.

I remember sitting with the President of Liberia, the remarkable Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, whose country faces so many challenges – and who said to me words I'll never forget as we spoke of malaria's toll: "It's not only that the children of Africa deserve a future. It's that Africa itself deserves the future these children would have. Africa deserves the help they would provide in developing and building the continent."

In the same way, the world deserves your help. And you deserve the feeling of contribution and satisfaction that can only come from giving of yourself to the greater good.

There is inspiration to be found in the very motto of this university: Surgite! [it's pronounced sur-gi-tay – verify with a university official.]

Push on!

Push on with your journey. Push on into the world. Push on to become part of the solution.

Don't just witness problems, help tackle them. Don't just live in your country, help build it. Don't just be part of the world, be an active citizen of the world.

As a society, we are richer than those who came before us. We are more advanced. We are destined to live longer and in greater comfort than our ancestors.

And yet we are still pilgrims. We are still in search of something.

We seek deeper meaning in our lives. And we can achieve it – if we chart our own path, following our own convictions, guided by our own instincts.

Live for something larger, and you will have a larger life.

Thank you.