

Address of James Orbinski on his installation as the Seventh Principal of Massey College

April 10, 2025

Chief Sault; Chancellor Hall; Visitor Prichard (who is former President of U of Toronto, currently Chair of the Board of Tory's Law Firm, and our Visitor—the constitutional and ceremonial and head of the College); Professor Owusu-Bempah; Professor McGahan; Junior Fellows; distinguished guests; friends of Massey College; Professor Stein – Janice is truly one of my oldest mentors and dearest friends. Over the last thirty years, I have called her many times from some of the most dangerous and humanitarian emergencies. I called her for political, strategic or negotiating advice – knowing I could count on her to help me think through my confusion and sometimes fear, to clarity. General Romeo Dallaire – ours is a brotherhood forged in the bloody and horrific reality of the Genocide in Rwanda, and in long years of mutual support in genuine friendship. General Dallaire is a national and international hero, and will soon be joining us as a Massey Chair. Welcome to Massey College! And welcome too, to my very dear friends, and to my family – my wonderful wife and best friend, Rolie; our sons Rohin and Taidgh; our daughter Riya; our G-d son Tate Hew-Bailey; and to my very dearest brother Kevin Orbinski, and sister-in-law Patti Ooms.

It is a great honour and privilege to become the seventh Principal of Massey College. As such, I am committed to cultivating learning, leadership, and civility for the public good, around issues of contemporary concern. I follow in the footsteps of Robertson Davies; Patterson Hume; Anne Saddlemeyer; John Fraser – who is here today with his usual charm, good cheer and warmth; Hugh Segal; Natalie Des Rossiers - who is also here today, and who successfully steered the College through the COVID pandemic; and Jonathan Rose who as interim principal successfully kept us on course through to my appointment. I follow them, and in the hope of the Massey family and the many other subsequent benefactors, in their belief and commitment to cultivating the public good.

For 63 years, in this magnificent Ron Thom architecture, in the heart of this global city, we are in full partnership with the University of Toronto – one of top ten public universities in the world. We choose from the university's best graduate students, and our mutual commitment to learning, excellence, and to the public good, is immutable. By engaging with both academia and the wider community – in the arts, in business, politics, civil service, the Judiciary, Journalism, and civil society organizations nationally and internationally, Massey College has drawn and built around it a living, vibrant membership of Senior Academic Fellows, Quadranglers, Junior Fellows and Alumni – each and together in community - committed to the public good.

In the Upper Library, the Junior Common Room, or in this great Ondaatje Hall, the most powerful thing that happens is not formal occasions like this wonderful day, but informal conversation. Conversation that can range from inspiration to commiseration. The College

is commonly described as being filled with the ‘Massey Magic’, where for example, in the last week alone, one could talk informally with Canada’s former Governor General Adriene Clarkson quietly preparing the Massey garden for the coming spring; or with former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Canada, Beverly McLachlin; or Ken Roth, the Executive director of Human Rights Watch; or Geoffrey Hinton, who as the father of Artificial Intelligence, was awarded last years’ Nobel Prize in physics. One could also be in conversation with any of our wonderful Junior Fellows graduating with PhDs and other graduate or professional degrees for extraordinary achievements in science, engineering, medicine, the arts, the humanities and the social sciences, and who – to the delight of their families and the Massey Community – will go on to places of leadership in our society. All this in the last week.

Through conversation, dialogue, and debate, we discover again and again that the public good is not a fixed end, with the map to it chiselled in stone. It is a North Star guiding us. The public good changes as the frontiers of knowledge change, and as challenges of the times change. Its pursuit demands open, capacious minds that are able to hold many different views, and that are committed to learning today from the past, toward a good that may come tomorrow. Since its founding, our multidisciplinary College has illuminated and responded to the changing social, political and economic circumstances of society’s particular time and place, all with a view to understanding and shaping the public good.

After medical school, I began my long and fruitful journey with the College, starting in the early 1990 as student of the great Ursula Franklin. Over the years, especially when working internationally, I often visited Massey, for precious hours with College faculty over lunch or dinner for advice and counsel, and used an office across the Quad to write. I learned many things here: that one never leads alone; that I was not the first to feel rage at injustice; that anger is destructive and ultimately a waste of energy; that patience is required for learning and insight; that I was not alone in seeking a world that is more fair, more just, and more equitable; that effective leadership is synonymous with a commitment to learning and excellence; that leadership sometimes means humbly accepting that I was wrong; that if I wanted to learn, I could glean great insight, wisdom and pragmatism from others with different perspectives; that if I engaged critically and with initiative, and a view to problem solving, that small and great things can be achieved, and that - when neither the small nor the great is possible for now - sometimes the best we can do is commiserate, muddle through, and prepare alternatives for the next new beginning. It was here at the College, that I wrote long sections of the acceptance speech I gave in Oslo when MSF was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. I have since been a Massey Saul Rae Fellow; a Senior Fellow, and a member of the board. Massey has been dear to my heart – a community and a home - for more than half my life. I am deeply grateful to the members of this community, for your gifts of mind, time, energy, and benefaction to the college - a college that has nurtured me and so many others through its commitment to the public good.

Massey College actively cultivates leadership especially among junior fellows through engaged mentorship, and by intentionally shining a multidisciplinary lens on issues of

contemporary concern. Great minds are among us, like John Polanyi whose Nobel Prize for Chemistry is quietly displayed in our private dining room. And great elders with great wisdom too have been, and are among us, like Gimmi Stacey Laforme of the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation, and Chief Sault. Indeed, it was Chief Sault who only a few weeks ago, remarked to me that in her experience, “Compassion is particularly necessary in times of discipline.” We share our approach to the Public Good to the wider public through the Massey Lectures, where great and diverse leaders in thought and practice deliberate on issues of contemporary concern. Massey lecturers have included Martin Luther King; Levi Strauss; Noam Chomsky; Margaret Atwood; Adrienne Clarkson; Thomas King; Doris Lessing; and John Kenneth Galbraith. In each, the Massey lecturer has explored the ideas that make us who we are, and ask the questions that in seeking the answers, may make us better human beings.

And we have nurtured this rare and precious dialogic space with a fundamental commitment to academic freedom and respect for free speech and the dignity of the other – even the dignity of those we disagree with, and sometimes profoundly so- using civility as our guide.

And we enjoy ! Literature, film, music, the performing and visual arts – where we humans create, and reflect ourselves to ourselves – these are a vital lens for what Socrates described as the “sense of wonder (that) is the mark of the philosopher.” These are and will continue to be well-used at Massey, where we are committed to the public good. For what good can there be without pause that invites insight - and perhaps awe, and joy and celebration?

And what are issues of contemporary concern today? Well, there is certainly no shortage !! We face major challenges of the global commons, as never before. The *2025 Global Risks Report (GRP)* ¹ describes a fractured global landscape, where escalating geopolitical, environmental, societal and technological challenges threaten stability and progress. The GRP identifies AI-infused disinformation as the greatest threat in a rapidly destabilizing and reconfiguring world. AI is already revolutionizing work in every domain: research, the professions, the white-collar sector, and through its fusion with robotics, in forms of physical labour. And in revolutionizing work, it will revolutionize human societies. This is against a backdrop of biodiversity and ecosystem loss and a now inexorable global warming. Our climate crisis is accelerating extreme weather events; changing patterns of infectious diseases; causing crop failures and rising food insecurity and famine, and accelerating internal displacement and migration across borders.

There are many issues of contemporary concern, but none are more pressing than what has been imposed upon us by a populist American authoritarian president, who is wreaking havoc domestically, and who is hell bent on remaking the world.

With constant bluster and bullying, domestically Donald Trump has centralized power to the executive, taken a chainsaw to government services, and started mass arrests and

deportations. He is defying the courts, and is going after lawyers and legislators who disagree with him; going after media and scientists whom he disagrees with, and after universities – which are in VP JD Vance’s words “the enemy.”² This includes Harvard, and Larry Summers wrote last week in the NYT that universities must resist, for “without acts of resistance, what protects the rule of law?”³ Summers concludes that “(The future of Universities) and America are in the balance.”

Following his legitimate election in the Fall, on his inauguration day, Donald Trump declared a new Golden Age with the USA as an imperialist expansionist power, willing to invade Greenland, the Panama Canal and to annex Canada. While yesterday he blinked on his Global Reciprocal Tariffs, in less than 80 days, he has blown up the 80-year old global trading system that America created. Trump has literally changed the world. John Rapley, of Cambridge University, has declared that so “bizarre” is Donald Trump’s trade war, that it effectively brings the Western age to its end.⁴

For Canada, America is no longer a friend, but a predator at our border. This is truly an existential moment for us as a country. We need to invigorate and defend our democracy. We need not simply to find, but to remake and create our place in the world, and most especially in partnership with the like-minded. This is a time where Canada must – and will – reimagine our society and the next chapter in the story of our country. Massey College will be part of this conversation. As citizens – as Canadians - we must not abandon who we are fundamentally. At Massey College we will use our diversity of disciplines, of generations, of thought and acumen, to imagine an even better Canada that is prosperous, caring, diverse, and strong: a Canada where everyone is included on an equitable footing. We must continue to - and more actively - embrace the intentions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and become true partners as Three Founding Nations to our country. We must imagine a Canada with a new respect for the biosphere that gives us life, and a Canada where we can innovate and channel our technologies – new and old – for the good of us, and not simply for the gain of those who control them. Though challenged as never before, we must not abandon but invigorate our commitments to multilateralism, Human Rights, The Laws of War, and the pursuit of justice and fairness and especially for the Global South. Massey will be part of this conversation on Canada in the World.

Let me close by reading briefly from one of my favorite contemporary authors, Ben Okri. Okri is a Nigerian-born British poet and novelist who won the Booker Prize, for his novel *The Famished Road*. In his poem, *Mental Fight*⁵, he writes:

This distant music of the future
Haunts me.
And I think it will be something
Amazing to hear,
A delight to the gods,
Provided we don’t lose our way
More than we already have,

And provided we are guided
 By our deepest love,
 The love that connects us all
 On this little globe of beauty ...

I whisper to myself modest maxims
 As thought-friends for a new age.
 See clearly, think clearly.
 Face pleasant and unpleasant truths;
 Face reality.
 Free the past.
 Catch up with ourselves.
 Never cease from upward striving.
 We are better than we think.
 Don't be afraid to love, or be loved.
 As within, so without.
 We owe life abundant happiness.

We here, in this Great Hall are Massey College. We do not have answers fixed in stone, but we do have a tried-and-true method to guide us. Massey College is ready to do what Massey does best: cultivate learning, leadership and civility for the public good, on issues of contemporary concern. This North Star has made Massey truly shine in its history. And it will make Massey glow in the future.

I am proud to be its Principal.

END

¹ World Economic Forum (2025). Global Risks Report. Geneva. Available at: <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/>

² CBC Front Burner (2025). Professors are the enemy': Trump's War on Higher Education. Transcript. March 26, 2025. Available at: available at <https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-risks-report-2025/>

³ Larry Summers (2025). If Powerful Places Like Harvard Don't Stand Up to Trump, Who Can? Guest Essay. April 3, 2025. New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/04/03/opinion/larry-summers-harvard-trump.html?searchResultPosition=3>

⁴ John Rapley. April 5, 2025. Donald Trump's bizarre trade war brings the Western age to its end. Globe and Mail. Accessed April 7, 2025 at: <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/business/commentary/article-donald-trumps-bizarre-trade-war-brings-the-western-age-to-its-end/>

⁵ Ben Okri. 1999. *Mental Fight*. Phoenix Press, London, pg. 65-66.

END