

**“Everything is Connected”: Seven Stops  
SSU Convocation Address April 17, 2021  
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Friends and especially graduates... It’s really a privilege to be invited to speak this morning. But of course, it’s also a challenge. What to say? Where to start, how to end? I’ve had fun trying to pull my thoughts together in some more or less coherent form— you’ll be happy to know that this is the abridged version. Even so, time is short so, here we go...

**“Everything is connected. We can start anywhere and go anywhere. We will never know all the connections but we can know enough to get around.”**

Those are the words of Dr. JEP Butler, now deceased, who I met 40 or so years ago (when I was about 23) and doing my PhD in Sociology at the University of New Brunswick and he was 86 – retired, of course, but still very engaged in reading and thinking. He became a mentor and friend. I’ve included this quote in nearly every syllabus I created at SSU. My talk this morning will be a sort of demonstration of the maxim – a tiny glimpse at how we can start anywhere and go anywhere – that’s the hope!

Imagine that we’re going on a road trip and we’re going to make some stops along the way - “scenic lookouts” or “points of interest”. There will be seven stops in all.

**STOP ONE: RESILIENCE**

I’ve always assumed that resilience is a good thing. Resilience is defined as “the ability to withstand adversity and bounce back from difficult life events.”<sup>1</sup> We celebrate people or communities that demonstrate resilience. We think, for example, of individuals who just seem to get knocked down, again and again, by life’s circumstances, and we call them “resilient” when they get back up, dust themselves off, and have another go; we call communities resilient when they refuse to give up after a disaster of some kind – natural or manmade - or through chronic challenges and misfortune. There are endless examples, from small communities to large, whole nations even – both rich and poor. And we call

“ethnic minority groups” resilient when they survive the pressures and priorities of dominant cultural groups.

Life goes on... if you're resilient. Surely then, to be resilient is something to celebrate. But then I hear about a new podcast called *“Don't Call Me Resilient”*<sup>2</sup> – the promo says that “it’s a provocative podcast about race that goes in search of solutions for those things no one should have to be **resilient** for”, hosted and produced by Vinita Srivastava. Maybe there’s more to resilience than I’d thought.

What if – in the name of resilience - we are actually maintaining and even still developing policies that force resilience on whole communities or ethnicities of people? What if we are sometimes using resilience as a front for persistent INjustice?

As I say this out loud, it seems painfully obvious that this is, in fact, the case. We say we want to address poverty, or homelessness, or addictions, or mental health issues, and so on. We pour money into initiatives that we think will help and maybe we move the needle ever so slightly. But then the money runs out, the program ends and too often, nothing much has changed. Time passes and those who are IN the circumstances know that **resilience is just another word for survival in the face of hardship. At some point, resilience shouldn't be celebrated; it should be resisted. To be called “resilient” isn't a compliment (in some cases) so much as a vote for the status quo.**

Moving on... we'll make a brief stop at our second “look out”.

## **STOP TWO: THE NATURE OF TRUTH**

During episode two of the *Don't Call Me Resilient* podcast, Vinita is interviewing Rev. angel Kyodo Williams, a writer, activist, ordained Zen priest and the author of *Being Black: Zen and the Art of Living with Fearlessness and Grace*. Rev. angel's definition of an “activist” is interesting - she says that what Socrates called “a philosopher”, she would call an “activist”. This is interesting because we often think of philosophers as living in the world of ideas and activists as being pragmatists who want to get things done. Philosophers are thinkers and activists are doers, aren't they?

But Rev. angel says that activists are not so much devoted to a cause, but to uncovering a “**more complete truth**”. Truth – as I’m sure you’ve discovered – is wonderfully, annoyingly, flirtatiously... elusive – we “see through a glass darkly”. There’s lots of talk of activism these days and that excites me, as we encourage young people to become advocates and activists for social justice. But it also concerns me. Are we also equipping them to discover a more complete truth?

I wonder if we sell activism short when we let it be about single issues or causes – racism, reconciliation, climate change, poverty, etc. etc. - or some subset of these larger issues, and not about a determination to get to the “wholeness” of a cause in all of its inherent and historical complexity. Do we tell them that it takes patience and determination to comprehend inherent and historical complexity?

When activists have too narrow a focus, their energy goes into winning small battles. And this is tricky because the small battles matter – getting a government policy to change may be a small battle in the scheme of things, but it takes enormous perseverance, dedication and effort. So I’m not saying those small battles don’t matter; they DO! But the temptation for activists may be to take what appear to be expedient shortcuts in order to accomplish the immediate goal, and I get this – believe me!

Lobbying and activism are by nature political activities and politics can be a dirty business. Sometimes it seems that truth doesn’t stand a chance. It’s easy to get drawn into an unholy battle where smoke and mirrors and half-truths are the weapons of choice. But those shortcuts may ultimately sacrifice truth and truthfulness, and consequently, I would argue, also credibility and integrity. I see this more and more as our collective zeal for justice has the unintended consequence – at least sometimes – of blinding us to “inconvenient truths”. Truth gets spun, this way and that, until it is so distorted that it’s actually not the truth at all.

And, a quick aside, this is made all the messier when social media and, in many cases, also mainstream media get involved. Public opinion is a very fickle thing and mobs – whether they are online or in person – have never been known to think things through, calmly and rationally. We might easily be seduced into thinking that the mob – or public opinion – is going to favour one side or the other and it’s better to have them on *my side* than on *yours* when it comes down

to it. And of course, the public imagination seems only to want to deal with simplistic, dualistic, positions on incredibly complex issues. Who has time for inherent and historical complexity?

Words have power and social media can provide a forum which exists outside of many of the checks and balances of our institutions - not to suggest that the checks and balances are always effective, mind you - but discourse on social media sometimes feels more like street brawls amongst rival gangs than any sort of reasoned and regulated discussion. And increasingly, even on social media, the “gangs” have their territory which they defend ruthlessly so that should anyone post something that runs against the flow, they are shamed, shut down, shunned – run out of town. Most of us quickly learn to give a wide berth to gang-held territory. But how then are we to engage in productive, thoughtful conversation about important issues? How are we to be Socratic philosopher activists?

If, in the pursuit of understanding, you only listen to voices that confirm what you already think – which is the very thing that the social media algorithms actually do (I understand) – it results in “confirmation bias”. And when that happens, perhaps you are not being *educated* so much as *indoctrinated*.

Genuine education requires a much deeper and broader exploration. Listen to outliers and search out people who have a different perspective and perhaps also a different experience of life – and if at all possible, do it in person, face to face, over a cup of coffee or a walk along the river.

The challenges are real; the stakes are high; reality is complicated; people are motivated by righteous indignation in the face of injustice. But our aim should never be to win at all costs when that means sacrificing **what we know to be true** (even though our knowledge of what is true is always incomplete) **for the sake of what we believe to be right**. In other words, a right or just outcome does not justify tampering with the portions of truth that we do have; **as tempting as it is, we shouldn't tamper with the evidence!**

Another a quick aside... I've been challenged this year by one of Jordan Peterson's 12 Rules for Life – rule #8 is this: “tell the truth, or at least don't lie”.<sup>3</sup> Because of the nature of truth and the fact that it's actually very hard to know if what we believe to be true, IS true or how complete or incomplete it might be, the focus

really should be on the second part – “at least don’t lie”. The gist of it is this: **we may not know when we are telling the truth, but we know when we are lying.** And while lying may be a convenient shortcut, **lies make a very poor foundation for a more just society.** Lying may seem to be quite an attractive option when it can be used in the service of “good” – the end justifying the means – but **activists who are willing to lie should not be trusted. Too often they are willing to bend truth and every scrap of evidence to their purpose and thus may forfeit the more complete and more difficult truth – in the long run they will NOT make things better.**

Ok, moving on... that’s all we’ll say about TRUTH.

### **STOP THREE: ISABEL WILKERSON’S BOOK, CASTE: THE ORIGINS OF OUR DISCONTENTS**

I really just want to mention this book because I suspect that I’m going to discover it in the midst of my thoughts on lots of issues going forward. It’s not that the book is perfect or that it’s the final word on racism and casteism. But it is – in my view – beautifully written, compelling, a significant contribution to the enterprise of seeing and understanding the historical context within which so much of our present experience of racism and other systemic problems, rests.

For those of us who want to understand social issues so as to think and live in such a way as to leave the world none the worse for our having been here (or perhaps even a tiny bit better), I think Wilkerson’s analysis is an important – and perhaps even profound – piece. If you want to be an activist, in the best sense of the word – that is, in the spirit of a Socratic philosopher – please read Caste. And, as far as possible, read it with an open mind and a contrite heart, no matter who you are or where you’re coming from.

That’s it for Caste. So next stop is a big one:

### **STOP FOUR: THE ARC OF THE MORAL UNIVERSE IS LONG BUT BENDS TOWARD JUSTICE**

This is a great quote! And we don’t have much time to unpack it, sadly. Many people associate this quote with Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and later with

President Obama. But this is actually a paraphrasing of a portion of a sermon delivered in 1853 by the abolitionist minister Theodore Parker. In that sermon, Parker said: **‘I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.’**”<sup>4</sup>

I’m prepared to believe the sentiment behind both versions of this quote, but there is a challenge in how we interpret this in terms of our engagement and our activism. When I envision the “arc”, I see it sweeping gently but consistently upward – a soft but unmistakable arc. As I think about the image in more detail, however, I realize that the short version of the quote, which I value for its inspiration and ultimately, it’s comfort – actually obscures some important details. Consider these things:

- if time is the vertical axis and justice is the horizontal axis, we don’t actually know where time begins or ends and so we can’t know where our current position on the arc is;
- Also, our understanding of justice may vary over time and across cultures and this is important to remember if we are serious about dealing with, for example, colonialism. Weed warning! – we can’t get into that this morning.
- And perhaps the most important point that may have been lost in translation – though certainly not in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s life and work – is the role that our own actions play. Do our actions matter or will justice prevail whether we strive for it or not?

We can see evidence throughout history (as we have recorded it and even as we have experienced it) that the actions of small groups DO make a difference. And to the extent that those small groups often coalesce around the ideas and actions of a single individual, even one person can make a difference.

But the other point that I would encourage you to consider is this: the arc is the summary of trillions or gazillions of data points LOTS of data points - most of which do not fall perfectly on the arc but fall somewhere above or below the arc. After all, the arc has to account for the rise and fall of great civilizations and a number of mass extinctions. So – we might have confidence that justice will prevail – ultimately and even incrementally - but it’s probably not wise to assume

that all of our thoughts and actions – motivated as we believe they are, by a desire for justice – always fall on or above the arc. We still have to do the hard work of wrestling with competing ideas, programs, policies.

Ok, now onto the next stop...

### **STEP FIVE: THE RIGHT SIDE OF HISTORY**

I've heard the phrase lately - "being on the right side of history" as a kind of rallying cry for a variety of causes. This is a fascinating term as we consider our engagement and activism and as we think about resilience. To be on the "right side of history" is to have beliefs and actions that would be plotted on or above the arc, at least at that point in history. We all WANT to be "on the right side of history" don't we? Does anyone really WANT to be on the wrong side of history?

It's also possible for some thought or action to be above the arc at one point but then below the arc at a later point as the arc sweeps upward. We speak of people who are "ahead of their time", but then time catches up.

We are witnessing the critique of history that results in the removal of monuments that memorialize people who we now believe acted in a way that is "below the arc", even though at the time perhaps they were believed to be acting in a way that was appropriate or even admirable.

Or, to really muddy the waters, maybe they DID act above the arc in one area or situation and below it in others... we're complex and flawed beings, for sure! My point in saying this is as a word of both encouragement and caution – **we ought to think and act with humility, for who knows how our thoughts and actions will be judged in the future.** And, as a corollary, it's probably good to recognize the humanity and fallibility of those we have designated at a particular time and place as "heroes". **Humility and compassion are 360-degree practices or they're not the real thing; they're not humility and compassion at all.**

This is a good place to Segway to...

## **STOP SIX: THE SSU MISSION**

Our mission at SSU is **“to prepare people, through academic and personal development, for a life of justice, beauty, and compassion, enabling a humble, creative engagement with their world.”** Maybe this is an audacious goal, but it’s worth aspiring to! Year after year we celebrate our graduates – the lot of you - and send you off into a crazy world. We trust that the community you’ve encountered and contributed to here – comprised as it is of imperfect, messy people who are trying to make sense of ourselves while we support and encourage one another and YOU, will give you a good foundation for whatever path you find going forward.

This is, of course, not the end of your learning, but actually just a transition. As you toss your caps in the air, figuratively, I believe that I am speaking the truth (or at least not lying) when I say that you are seen, you are loved, you are celebrated; but you are not done! You are works in progress.

You WILL continue to learn and grow. You WILL make mistakes. You WILL follow your dreams and perhaps occasionally find yourself at a dead end. You WILL – I hope – experience the passion and the pain that comes from being a philosopher activist and the frustration of coming up against persistent injustices that are hard enough to comprehend, let alone dismantle. You WILL make decisions about where to be (when and where you put down roots), who to be with (the kind of people that you want to have around you) and what to do (the things you invest your life energy into).

I encourage you to think carefully about what matters to you – what your values are – and I am certain that if you commit to living a life that is consistent with your values, things will ultimately “work out”. One of my favourite quotes comes from the 2011 movie, *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* – it’s about “a group of British pensioners moving to a retirement hotel in India, run by the young and eager Sonny, played by Dev Patel”;<sup>5</sup> Sonny is a charismatic character – a visionary entrepreneur who creates a brochure that depicts the Marigold Hotel as he envisions it When one of the pensioners points out the inconsistencies between the brochure – the Hotel as Sonny envisions it – and the Hotel as it actually is, Sonny replies: “Everything will be all right in the end... if it's not all right now then it's not yet the end.”<sup>6</sup> OK then! Carry on - the arc bends toward justice and we are not just along for the ride – what we do will make a difference as we work to

transform one thing or another from it is now to where we want it to be. We all have a dream, or many dreams.

You may think that this is a great place for our road trip to come to an end, but we have one more stop to make...

### **OUR LAST STOP: ERIC MANHEIMER**

Does anyone know who Eric Manheimer is? No one? Ok, what about Max Goodwin? He is the medical director of New Amsterdam, a series trending on Netflix which is based on the true story of Dr. Eric Manheimer of Bellevue Hospital Centre in New York. In the pilot episode of the series, The New Amsterdam, Max Goodwin is appointed medical director of this large public hospital in New York City.

He's not your typical medical director who wears a suit and tie and sits in his office. Max wears scrubs and is out and about, in the hospital and even in the neighbourhoods outside the hospital – he's engaged. Max antagonises the Board by apparently not caring as much about money as he does the patients that come to New Amsterdam. He shakes things up right away by firing most of the cardio-thoracic unit, appointing a new head and giving him free reign to run the department for the benefit of the patients.

The show highlights and addresses a wide variety of real issues – systemic issues – that seem to be immune to any significant reform or rehabilitation; situations that force resilience on everyday people. But the really important thing for the purposes of my talk this morning, is that Max Goodwin – my superhero at the moment - consistently runs the hospital with ONE question: **HOW CAN I HELP?** It's so simple but it proves to be incredibly and beautifully subversive in the face of structures that cannot deal well with the actual impacts of bureaucratic decisions and policies on the health of the patients.

Whatever else you may have learned in your time at SSU and wherever your path takes you, I encourage you – actually I *challenge* you and each of us – to let those 4 words become our mantra and the foundation for our efforts to be philosopher activists in a world that desperately needs philosopher activists: **how can I help?** Start today. Apply it in every relationship and situation and to every issue.

So, go forth – be philosopher activists – be humble and creative. You can start anywhere and go anywhere, but pursue justice, beauty and compassion. Everything is connected. You can start anywhere and go anywhere.

Thank you!

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.everydayhealth.com/wellness/resilience/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://podcasts.apple.com/au/podcast/dont-call-me-resilient/id1549798876?i=1000508417312>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n53HmC1zxVc>

<sup>4</sup> ([https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-smith-obama-king\\_n\\_5a5903e0e4b04f3c55a252a4](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/opinion-smith-obama-king_n_5a5903e0e4b04f3c55a252a4))

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.quotes.net/movies/the\\_best\\_exotic\\_marigold\\_hotel\\_144309](https://www.quotes.net/movies/the_best_exotic_marigold_hotel_144309)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.quotes.net/mquote/1080379>