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Convocation Address
St Stephen's University 2022

Fellow graduates, faculty, staff, family, friends: We are a snapshot of the SSU community at this moment. It is an honour to share space with you this morning and it is a privilege to bring my voice into our midst again this weekend.

Graduates—none of us have had a neat and tidy degree journey. Unexpected personal life experiences and a global shut down of life as we knew it mid-degree have left their marks. I believe what we have gone through has refined the quality of our thinking and our work. It has also left us a little shell-shocked as we imagine next steps.

I recently read an article by Rabbi Danya Rutt who likened our current state of bewilderment and trauma to the Israelites standing at the base of Mt. Sinai.¹ She writes about Aaron, who as a community leader, is also existing within the trauma of life in Egypt and a dangerous escape, not unlike the people he is leading. Rabbi Rutt notes his trauma-influenced actions towards quick, surface level solutions. She highlights that they only lead to further pain. Rutt ponders if there are ways we might bring healing to our circles of influence and not further pain in this time of collective trauma.

Compared to many experiences of this pandemic, my experience has been primarily inconvenience and fear of the unknown. Yet the lived experience of those outside my privileged reality continues to shatter my ideals of 'the good life'. The pandemic has further awakened me to the knowledge that my flourishing is tied to my neighbour's flourishing, whether that be a pandemic reality or a climate reality or current experiences of war and displacement taking place on our globe. True flourishing is mutual flourishing.

This can feel as overwhelming as it is encouraging.

¹ Rabbi Danya Ruttenberg, "The Trauma of the Golden Calf: Terror, Loss, Technical and Adaptive Challenges," *Life is a Scared Text*, (April 4, 2022). <https://lifeisasacredtext.substack.com/p/the-trauma-of-the-golden-calf?s=r>

How do you dream of global flourishing when we can't even imagine our local community flourishing? An important question for me in this has been to slow down and notice when my flourishing negatively affects the flourishing of others. A survival of the fittest and the richest mentality is only perpetuating our own ruin. Whether or not we like it, we are in this together and my flourishing is tied to your flourishing.

When I am overwhelmed with war, climate change, pandemic news and political polarization, I do what anyone would do—I watch Netflix. To be more specific, I watch documentaries, documentaries on farming and carbon capturing and seaweed farms and composing.

I am amazed and encouraged by the ideas that people have for saving our planet and for living well upon the earth. Whether they are ever adopted by countries and corporations, the resiliency and creativity of grassroots movements will always put a bounce back in my step and encourage my own endeavours towards building a better world.

Dirt

One day during this past year, my classmate Anna, who was at the time an Australian living in Latvia, and was sharing my Canadian Netflix account (as you do), pointed me towards one such documentary that she had watched entitled *Kiss the Ground*.²

It is a film about an affection for dirt. According to this documentary, if we love on our soil, our soil has the ability to heal itself, heal our climate and save our world from the destruction of our carbon producing habits.

It is my understanding that dirt is not alive, but it is an excellent host for good things that are. When we take care of the dirt with practices like not tiling, cover crops and allowing biodiversity, dirt hosts living things enabling the health and flourishing of microorganisms and plants. When we do not care for our dirt, we will basically turn our planet into a desert and life as we know it will end.

²Josh Tickell and Rebecca Harrell Tickell, dirs. *Kiss the Ground*, (Big Picture Ranch, 2020).

BUT the opposite is just as drastic. Caring for the soil not only has the immediate benefits of plant health, food growth and human sustainability, but healthy soil aids in the regeneration of all living things. Not only that, care for and healing of the earth's dirt can solve our carbon crisis. A healthy planet processes carbon, an unhealthy one, abused and neglected, gets you a mega ton of carbon sitting in the atmosphere causing global warming. Did you know healthy dirt, through the process of photosynthesis, has the ability to sequester that mega ton of carbon sitting in our atmosphere? By caring for dirt, we can literally see healing come to ourselves and to the planet.

Caring for soil is more than just being sustainable with our resources, it is about regeneration. Regeneration is not creating something from nothing, but it has a creation-like feel to it. This regeneration process brings life where there was death and then that new life creates more life. Regeneration is an **explosion** of life.

What Dirt Are We Growing In?

This morning, I would like to draw a parallel between healthy soil that can heal our planet and healthy communities that can heal people. Just as the soil is the foundational element of all that we grow to sustain life, communities are the foundational element for growing people.

Humans too wither and flourish under certain conditions. Like farming, we have sometimes focused on outputs, productivity and short-term gains as a sign of health within our communities without turning our attention to the health of the conditions we are growing in.

It takes a different way of thinking to transition from problem solving outcomes to pouring thought and resources into the environments we are growing within. It can even feel counter intuitive or futile because results are not instant and can be hard to measure.

Sir Ken Robinson in his last YouTube video before his recent death also alludes to this idea. He says, "People flourish when the culture is right."³ "Do not focus on output, focus on culture in the same way sustainable farmers focus on soil."⁴

³ Sir Ken Robinson, "A Future For Us All," YouTube video, April 1, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r1v31ZEIins>.

⁴ Ibid.

When soil is healthy, when it is alive with life, that life produces more life, which produces still more life. Robinson suggests that when we get a culture right, the same will happen to people, life will take care of itself.

Just as watching this type of documentary about healthy soil makes me go out and dig my hands into the earth and attempt to bring healing to the dirt so that it will in turn bring healing to me, I also want to dig my hands into my community. What is nurturing my community? What are the roots of my community being sustained by? How is my community healthy soil that will engender life that brings more life?

Just as we can have regenerative agricultural practices, I believe we can have regenerative social systems.

Regeneration within dirt occurs at the level of microorganisms. Microorganisms alchemize death into life. I believe regeneration is most often in the small and local and at the grassroots level. How can we be soil tenders in our communities?

Nourish the soil

In times of emotional, psychological, and spiritual change, the trauma of that change can lead us to desire quick fixes, surface level technical fixes, such as Aaron advising his community to build a golden cafe.

My challenge to each of us in this SSU community and those who are visiting today is to not react out of our current grief and pain by building individual or community level technical solutions. Instead, kneel low, dig your hands into the figurative soil that you are rooted in, and breathe life into what is hidden.

I can't tell you exactly what that will look like. It is as varied and creative as there are people in this room. Just as healthy dirt is a response to biodiversity, healthy communities also require diversity. Individuality, diversity of talent, unique identities and perspectives are all needed in building healthy regenerative communities. Bring what you have to the table and be hospitable to the gifts of others.

To those of you who have had the privilege of growing physically in this SSU community, take a handful of this community soil with you when you leave. This community is not perfect, but it has also been intentional about fostering healthy soil for several decades. Take what you have experienced and bring that regenerative life to wherever you plant yourself next.

And as I know others have also experienced, this community can be a place of healing should you ever be in need of some. This community has been the source of old woundings for me and yet this year I also experienced it as a source of healing. That, my friends, is regeneration. It is attention towards healthy soil that begets life, which begets more life, which begets still more life.

It is a deep and profound blessing to me the number of people who are in this room, who were also in this room 22 years ago at my first SSU convocation. For those who might remember, my undergrad thesis was on restoration and today I am speaking about regeneration. Restoration, although a beautiful and life-giving concept, has a static nature to it. Regeneration is adaptive. We need people who will direct us towards adaptive life-giving sources. This involves sitting in the grief of all that we have lost and imagining new ways of being. Wendell Berry says in his 2012 lecture “It All Turns on Affection”, “imagination enables sympathy, sympathy enables affection.”⁵ To love, we must first imagine.

Turn with affection towards the soil beneath your feet, figuratively and literally. As the Netflix documentary title suggests, “kiss the ground.”

⁵ Wendell Berry, *It All Turns on Affection: The Jefferson Lecture and Other Essays*, (New York, NY: Counterpoint, 2012).