

SAMC DEAN'S ADDRESS

FIRST THINGS

SEPT. 14, 2011

Welcome to SAMC – the School of the Arts, Media + Culture. For some, this is a welcome back—you've been away for the summer, and we're glad to see you again. This past week has been a time of reconnecting with friends, instructors, staff members, and a time of reorientation to the academic and social life here at TWU and in SAMC in particular. For others here, this is your first year at TWU, or perhaps the beginning of your involvement with SAMC—a special welcome to you! You have become part of the most energetic and exciting school at TWU.

I want to take time to do several things this afternoon by way of beginning the year. This event I have called *First Things*, and with it we are beginning what I hope will be an annual tradition of gathering as students, faculty, and staff in SAMC to launch into the academic year together: welcoming those new in our midst, hearing of the many upcoming events and highlights of the year ahead of us, and receiving a vision or challenge for the year. In our time together today I will be doing several things: I am going to look back briefly at last year, then I will lay out my vision for SAMC for the coming year. After this I'll introduce my colleagues from all our depts, and then we'll look at some specific events and highlights of the year ahead of us. Then we'll have some refreshments and have a chance to engage both with those we haven't seen in a while, and those we've not met yet.

We have passed our first birthday as a school! SAMC was launched on April 6, 2010, and we are now starting our second full academic year in this unique and ambitious entity called the School of the Arts, Media + Culture. On that April evening in 2010 as we launched this school, the final words of my address were: "Let's together look to the future and the things which God will do in, among, and through us all." By God's grace, our first year as a school was indeed filled with riches. Many times in the Old Testament the people of God were asked to raise up memorial stones, as a witness for later generations of what God had done. I want to take a few moments to celebrate with you some of SAMC's early memorial stones.

Shortly after the launch of the school, the BC government approved our two new programs, which then launched this time last year: a BA in Corporate Communication, a joint endeavour of SAMC with the School of Business, preparing graduates for leadership in the world of business communication, with skills in public relations, organizational behaviour, marketing, and project management. And our first professional degree—preparing graduates for careers as professional actors—a BFA in Acting. Students immediately jumped at the opportunities both these programs afforded, and they have become important parts of the SAMC program family already.

We opened last year by hosting our 5th annual Verge conference on the arts, and finished the year in March with our 2nd annual Festival of the Arts, Media and Culture—two weeks of student performances and exhibits highlighting the fine creative work you are all engaged in. In May we launched an online academic journal where Christian scholars can engage important questions around the intersection of the arts and Christian faith. We've entitled the journal *The Verge* as well...visit it online at www.vergearts.com

A big thanks to those of you who joined us last year for the maiden voyage of our two new interdisciplinary courses for first year majors in Art, Music, and Theatre: SAMC 111 (Critical Issues in the Arts), and 112 (An Interdisciplinary History of the Arts) are aimed at drawing students together around common themes and shared backgrounds at the outset of their studies, to better orient students to the larger questions and concerns in each discipline. Much great discussion and learning took place in our first year together, and we are looking ahead to another good year with these interdisciplinary courses.

Finally, two depts changed their names to more accurately reflect their curriculum and scholarly/creative emphasis: Art became the Dept of Art + Design, and Communications became the Dept of Media + Communication.

2010/2011 was indeed a tremendous first year for SAMC!

Now as I move into speaking about the year ahead of us, let me return to a few words from the school launch over a year ago. In speaking about the kind of graduates we strive to produce, I said that human societies really need storytellers: “storytellers who are not only creative but redemptive; storytellers who can shape a future of hope, one in which the wisdom of those who have come before us is applied to new problems and challenges in ways that are not only creative but redemptive.” I want to speak for a bit about the importance of story, and of storytellers, and finally to lay out a vision for each of us as we study, learn, teach, work, and create together in the coming year and beyond.

Leadership at TWU is guided by a strategic document which begins by outlining the essence and ends of the university. The university’s ends statement—an overarching expression of the intent behind all that we do at TWU—closes with these very large and inspiring words:

“Trinity Western University exists so that, through its students, alumni, faculty and staff, the world may experience Christ’s truth, compassion, reconciliation, and hope.”

How does this take place? One of the most significant ways is through storytellers, and the stories they fashion. If we examine the life of Jesus when he walked among people who desperately needed truth, compassion, reconciliation, and hope, we see him spending much of his time doing two very significant things: touching and healing people, and telling stories. Jesus often responded to his followers and to the crowds by telling stories: “the kingdom of heaven is like...”, “a man went out to sow seed...”, “there was a landowner who planted a vineyard...”, “there were 10 young women with lamps...”, “a man was going on a journey...”

Ironically, we followers of Jesus often become so focused on the didactic teachings of Paul and Peter in the New Testament—good, inspired, essential as they are—that we forget that the majority of the Bible is not didactic text, but story. God has revealed himself to his creatures, calling us into life-giving relationship with him, and he has done it through stories. Through the ages a great many of those stories have exerted such tremendous cultural power that they have become iconic or mythic—countless people, religious or not, will speak of a Good Samaritan, or a David and Goliath struggle. In the hands of skilled storytellers, stories have power when persuasive arguments may fall on deaf ears. Why is this? Because at our core, we humans are imaginative—people of imagination. Stories invite us to take up residence in the imaginative places in our being, the places where what is gives way to what could be. “You are a sheep, and the LORD is your shepherd, you don’t have any needs apart from him. This shepherd makes you lie down in lush green fields. He leads you besides quiet streams. He restores your soul.” The power of a metaphor: a story in miniature.

The 1997 Italian film *Life is Beautiful* (*La Vita e Bella*) won many awards for its writer/director/star Roberto Benigni, and it won the hearts of people around the world, by telling us a story...a story about a lovable storyteller who, in the face of unspeakable oppression and impending death in a WW2 Nazi concentration camp, spins an elaborate story for his young son. The idea of a story being so compelling that it keeps the boy from succumbing to the horrors around him, and ultimately leads him out of the camps into the symbolic fresh green fields of a new life—this is a hymn to the power of the imagination. Life is beautiful for this young boy because the father has imagined it so, and has inspired both his son and in turn the filmmaker’s audience with his grand and audacious vision.

It reminds me of some of the ideas behind a more recent film, *V for Vendetta*. In a climactic scene, firing his gun in vain at the character V, the chief of police yells out in frustration: “Die! Die! Why won’t you die? Why won’t you die?” V’s response, a central theme of the film: “Beneath this mask there is more than flesh. Beneath this mask there is an idea, Mr. Creedy, and ideas are bulletproof.”

Ideas are the stuff of the academic curriculum. In that place where the great ideas of human striving intersect with the truths of God, there you will find your professors most passionate. It is that intersection which is the core of the School of the Arts, Media + Culture, and the very heartbeat of TWU. For that is the place where questions meet truth, need meets compassion, brokenness meets reconciliation, and despair meets hope.

I have recently finished a most stimulating book by Daniel Pink entitled *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future* (Penguin, 2006). (worth buying just so you can read the subtitle over and over, especially at Christmas gatherings with family members who wonder why you are taking an arts-related degree in university: *why right-brainers will rule the future...why right-brainers will rule the future...*)

Pink’s thesis is a simple one: those who cultivate right-brain creativity, or as he calls it, right-brain-directed thinking, will have an edge in the age which is dawning upon us. He signals, as do many other contemporary authors, the end of the so-called information age of the late 20th century, and hails the onset of the conceptual age. In this century when so many knowledge-oriented jobs are being outsourced to other parts of the world, or replaced by software, he posits a new shift in society: Looking at the last several centuries of our cultural history, he says “we’ve progressed from a society of farmers to a society of factory workers to a society of knowledge workers. And now we’re progressing yet again—to a society of creators and empathizers, of pattern recognizers and meaning makers.” (50) If he is right, what a tremendous future is in store for us in the School of the Arts, Media and Culture! Creating and empathizing, pattern recognizing and meaning making are what we do day in and day out! These are our gifts and our calling.

His six skills or aptitudes for the successful leader to cultivate in this conceptual age are ones which we will recognize in SAMC:

- + design...the ability to create solutions which have significance and beauty
- + play...knowing the value of setting seriousness aside for a time
- + empathy...to understand the other
- + symphony...the capacity to synthesize disparate ideas into a new whole
- + meaning...a concern for the spiritual, the transcendent, and questions of purpose
- + story...the ability to fashion a compelling narrative

As I read this list, and ponder our wonderful learning community in SAMC, and even as I look out at so many of you—faculty, staff, and students—I see these words on your faces, in your relationships, in your

syllabi and your curriculum, your assignments and your research:
design – play – empathy – symphony – meaning – story

I want to close today with an opportunity, a challenge, and a vision.

The opportunity:

This year you will encounter storytelling in a variety of your classes. As we are reminded by Jesus, “he who has ears to hear, let him hear”.

- + in Modern Drama, Lloyd will tell about how stories were told in other centuries and cultures
- + in Scene Study, Michelle will ask you to make someone else’s story so much your own that you can tell it convincingly to others
- + in Cross-Cultural Communications, Ruth will tell you about how other cultures tell their stories
- + in Relational Communication, Bill will ask you to explore how your story can greatly impact someone else’s story
- + in Choir, Wes will tell you the how the story in the words you sing is also being conveyed in the music
- + in Music Theory, Allan will dig deep under the surface to find the structural stories which shape how the music is heard and felt
- + in Fundamentals of Design, Erica will explore the stories told by colour, shape, and texture
- + in Senior Studio, Doris will call forth your most passionate story for a final telling as you bid farewell to your university community

The opportunity is everywhere around you to engage with story in all its richness, and to allow the stories of others to teach you, to move you, to change you.

The challenge:

Become a great storyteller!

In this postmodern age, many have lost faith in such things as a metanarrative: how can there be a single overarching story to which all other stories relate? And yet the human craving for story has not diminished. Rather that craving has become more focused on one’s personal story. “Don’t tell me of grand stories... tell me your story, or perhaps just listen to mine.” The human craving for story is really not that hard to explain or understand...the cognitive scientist Mark Turner has said, “most of our experiences, our knowledge and our thinking is organized as stories.” (The Literary Mind, 4-5) American poet Muriel Rukeyser famously said: “the universe is made up of stories, not atoms.” (for those in Chemistry classes this year, that’s not always going to go over well with your professor!) Become a great storyteller!

Know Jesus, the Word, and his Story.

I believe in a metanarrative...I believe Jesus Christ is the Story, and that my story and all other stories can be found in him. All our struggles, triumphs, joys, sorrows—all human experience is part of the larger story of Jesus.

Know Jesus, the Word, and his Story...and know your own story. Get to know the stories of other people, and how their story relates to yours.

Study and learn how to tell stories well in your chosen academic discipline—stories which are inviting, nourishing, and satisfying—stories which take your hearers (your viewers) into worlds filled with truth, compassion, reconciliation, and hope.

In whatever your discipline, become a great storyteller!

Finally, a vision for SAMC this year:

Inspire change!

Daniel Pink speaks of moving beyond being high-tech, to becoming high concept and high touch. For him, “high concept involves the capacity to detect patterns and opportunities, to create artistic and emotional beauty, to craft a satisfying narrative, and to combine seemingly unrelated ideas into something new. High touch involves the ability to empathize with others, to understand the subtleties of human interaction, to find joy in one’s self and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the [everyday] in pursuit of purpose and meaning.” (51-52) High concept: can you design, synthesize, and create something new? High touch: can you do all this for the betterment of others? I would contextualize his definitions in the two great commandments Jesus gave: to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, strength, gifts, talents, and creativity...and to love others as you love yourself.

Our SAMC vision, which relates to what Pink is suggesting, is simple yet profound:

inspire change

- + be inspired by God (in-spire...the breathing-in of God’s Spirit)
- + be inspired by those who have come before and those who surround you
- + seek to be changed...let this inspiration change you
- + inspire change in those around you

SAMC is a remarkable place where positive mentoring takes place within a community of learning to nurture students into transformers of culture.

Become passionate, skilled, storytelling transformers of culture...

inspiring change...

that the world will experience Christ’s truth, compassion, reconciliation, and hope.