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NOTES FOR REMARKS

BY

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to the

UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES

GRADUATION CEREMONY

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Mr. Chancellor, Your Excellency the Governor General, Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Mr. Campus Council Chairman, Excellencies, Ministers, Distinguished Guests, Fellow Members of the 1987 Graduating Class:

In the course of 1987, during this 25th anniversary year, more than 100 thousand Canadians will visit Jamaica. I want you to know, Chancellor, that none will return to Canada with a greater sense of pride and attachment to this island than will I. To UWI at Mona, I extend, with considerable humility, my sincere thanks. To you, Mr. Public Orator, my gratitude for your generous citation.

Living in Canada at this moment are some several hundred thousand persons of Jamaican origin. Each one of them will share with Dr. Grant his joy and his pride at the honour this university has bestowed upon him. To Dr. Grant I extend my warmest congratulations; his many contributions to society benefit Canadians as well as Jamaicans.

In the next couple of hours the members of this graduating class will pass through a time warp, coming out the other side as different persons. Each of you will formally conclude a transformation that began quite innocently just a few years ago. I'd like to spend a few minutes reminding you just how much you've changed - just how different you'll be when you get up tomorrow morning.

A good start towards that understanding is found in a few words known to each one of you. They weren't written by Shakespeare or by Charles Lamb, Mr. Public Orator, but by another fellow who has become almost as famous. "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery," he said. Those words deserve repetition. Let's try them on all together. "Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery." It's kind of fun to say that in a get-up like this, isn't it? What matters is not the costume, though, but the value of the message. That one is important for several reasons; one of them to help set in context the changes that have taken place in you and around you since you first set foot on this beautiful Mona campus.

You are different from what you were just three or four years ago. The differences will stay with you for the rest of your lives. Those differences also distinguish you - and your classmates worldwide - from every other generation in all history. What you do about your distinctiveness will determine whether this Caribbean society, or any society, becomes richer or becomes irrelevant, even extinct.

How different have you become? Let's look at three instances.

Instance number one. You knew when you first arrived here that this planet was the only one in the solar system that possessed the peculiar combination of circumstances needed to support human life. While here, you have learned that that combination, while robust, is much more delicately balanced, much more vulnerable to human interference, than had been earlier believed; that careless and shortsighted behaviour can upset the balance, can degrade and destroy the vital life-support systems essential to our well-being as a species. You have learned, too, that the degradation of some of those systems, if allowed to

continue too long, will become irreversible, no matter what is done to stem the effect. You are the first generation in all history to possess this knowledge. It is knowledge that will encourage you to live prudently, or be aware that you diminish the welfare of your descendents.

Instance number two. You knew on your enrollment day that the human species is alone among all biological life in its ability to record its own history, to keep track of its accomplishments and its failures, its triumphs and its tragedies. While here you have learned just how extensive has been failure, how frequently has humankind repeated its errors, how often our species refuses to admit its misdeeds. You have learned as well, however, and yours is the first generation to possess the empirical evidence to prove it, that human error measured in nuclear terms can be so far reaching in its consequences, so devastating in its many effects, that for the first time in human experience there will be no second chance, no opportunity for a cover-up. This nuclear error, if committed, is potentially irremedial. This knowledge will force you to demand responsibility from governments, or be held hostage to the ambitions of nuclear adventurers.

Instance number three. You had some sense as you began your university studies that human beings were capable of attending to most of their needs if only the necessary resources could be assembled. You have learned while here that recent advances in science and technology have been so extensive that inadequate knowledge is no longer a barrier to the significant enhancement of human welfare worldwide. When resources are properly deployed, and political decisions wisely taken, humankind's oldest scourges can be overcome. Disease, malnourishment, illiteracy, and the other enemies of human dignity can be reduced and often eliminated. Yours is the first generation to realize that human misery will henceforth be the result of human indifference, and nothing else. That realization will inspire you to act humanely, or become prisoners of your own callous consciences.

These three distinguishing features should humble each one of you, and each one of your generation on every university campus in the world. Humbleness alone is an inadequate response to knowledge of this magnitude,

however. Something more is necessary. That something has to be resolve. "None but ourselves can free our minds." None but ourselves can decide to use our knowledge wisely.

I cannot conceive that there has ever been such a fearsome, yet such a promising, moment to be alive and to graduate into life. Never an occasion in human history when opportunity was so beckoning, yet frustration so widespread and so pervasive. Ready or not, you become actors in this drama tomorrow morning. Your education denies you the options of ignorance or indifference. On an island were most of you born; as a member of a single human race, dependent upon a common biosphere, do you all live. Events elsewhere, anguish anywhere, in one form or another, will impact upon you.

You must not assume that your new-found knowledge will be a guarantee of happiness or material well being. It will not. That knowledge is much more powerful than a mere guarantee, however. It is a reminder that no longer can you simply "stand aside and look." It tells you that in this centenary of Marcus Garvey, his conscience has become your responsibility.

The passage of time, Mr. Chancellor, be it a century or an hour, is measured in age-old ways, and some new ones. In the Ottawa headquarters of IDRC there is a large, computer driven clock. It hangs on the wall of the lobby where the public is encouraged to come and look at it. It is not a clock of the usual kind, however. It does not tell time in the familiar way; it counts two, quite different, phenomena and in doing so it makes a silent commentary on those three examples of difference that I have just recited.

This clock is the only one of its kind in the world. On one line, a digital read-out reveals the world's population minute by minute. A sophisticated computer program takes into account both births and deaths and turns the dials to indicate the net figure. On another line, the computer calculates the amount of arable land - land capable of producing food - that remains in the world. This second computer program takes into account such factors as desertification, deforestation and urbanization.

Just as one can stand in front of a large time-piece and watch the hands count off the seconds and the minutes, passers-by stand in front of this clock and watch the numbers change. One line of figures increases, the other decreases.

The world's population goes up at a rate of 25 persons every 10 seconds. The stock of arable land goes down at the rate of one hectare every 14 seconds.

Present in Ottawa at the dedication of the clock last spring was UWI's Rex Nettleford, a charter member of the IDRC Board of Governors. As much as any other person, he is deserving of credit as one of the architects of this unusual organization, one who contributed so much to the originality of its genius.

On July 11 of this year the clock recorded the moment when the world's population passed the 5 billion mark for the first time. When I left Ottawa yesterday, the clock indicated that the population had increased by some 30.6 million in the 139 days since July 11. That increase, as you know, is significantly greater than the population of

Canada, and is almost 14 times the population of Jamaica. (If any of you are wondering, the world's population at the time of Marcus Garvey's birth was about 1.6 billion, less than one third the present figure.)

The clock indicated yesterday that in that same period of 139 days the arable land had diminished by some 858,000 hectares, an area considerably larger than Barbados!

These are the physical circumstances of the world which will face you tomorrow morning: a limited amount of land, a growing population which can either create problems or contribute solutions. This potent combination of unsustainable land use and burgeoning population pressure is today one of the most telling factors contributing to worldwide environmental degradation. Everyone in this audience understands that the most powerful economic imperative in most parts of the developing world is income generation. This means, and particularly so in the rural regions, that the deterioration of the soil and the preservation of the forests is almost always beyond the ability of individuals to control, no matter how concerned about them those persons may be. This kind of deterioration

is a consequence of poverty and must be addressed as a poverty issue. The Brundtland Commission, which formally calls itself "The World Commission on Environment and Development", emphasized that point and, in its own title, repeated the linkage between environment and development. The Commission recognized other linkages as well and could have extended its title. It could have added the words "and political stability"; maybe even the words "and military security." The world is not short of examples to justify those linkages. Only a few hundred miles west of here, the issues of poverty and privilege, of the quality and the distribution of land, are major elements in disputes and conflicts that threaten the serenity of the entire hemisphere.

What can be done about the facts projected by the IDRC clock? Many things, but for starters one must realize that although the planet is physically crowded and will become much more so in the next several decades, our acquisition of knowledge works in the opposite direction. It has the effect of increasing our conceptual space. In the years that you have studied here at UWI you have become aware of any number of problems facing humankind, some of

them old, some of them new - but you have at the same time learned that there are now countless fresh approaches to solving most of them. Your professors have taught you that in lecture halls and laboratories. Bob Marley taught you that in his music. Now it's your turn to make use of what you've learned.

In the earliest years of this century, Mr. Chancellor, another Bob, this one a newspaper editor by the name of Bob Edwards in my home town of Calgary, wrote something that Bob Marley would have approved of. On January 27, 1912, Bob Edwards wrote "The things that come to the man who waits are seldom the things he waited for." (Had he been writing today, Edwards would have said, I hope, "man or woman".) That was true in Western Canada 75 years ago and it's true everywhere today. Truth, however, is not always welcome. Perhaps not even here on this lovely campus. Let's test it out.

With your new knowledge you're anxious to get underway. You realize you are a member of a privileged group, those few in this society who are university graduates; you are ready to contribute to the wise

solutions of these pressing problems. And you intend to do so. In these last few minutes before you graduate, you're on the right side, on the solution side. Tomorrow you will become part of the problem. How so? Let me explain by returning to the theme of poverty.

Even though poverty is far less prevalent - and certainly much less harsh - in this country than in many other places, each of you knows that it is no stranger. You understand, then, that it is poverty which denies to peoples and to governments access to better lives. It is poverty which denies those peoples and those governments a range of alternatives from which to choose the most desirable course of action. It is poverty which makes a mockery of even the concept of change. Poverty which is in large fashion a reflection of privilege and of the refusal of the privileged to share opportunity with others.

Your privileged position as university graduates must be employed by you, I urge, as a positive influence, not as an obstacle to others improving their lot. Yours must be the first generation to insist that the human race stop using up its natural capital base - the biosphere, the

first to ensure that leaders of government and captains of industry share with others the information on which they base their decisions, the first to have accepted a new standard of performance measurement - human dignity. You have on your side of this emancipation struggle much more knowledge and much more suasion than you might think.

Unlike those leaders of past revolutions - in England in 1688, in America in 1776, and in France in 1789 - we know in 1987 that this revolution, this "song of freedom", must be worldwide for we know, as those earlier revolutionaries did not, that our planet is not subject to zero-sum rules. In 1987 we must all be winners, lest we all be losers as a result of global deterioration in economic, political and environmental terms, or global destruction as a result of nuclear war.

The advantage of your privilege is immense. UWI has given you the power to think conceptually and to reason conceptually. That mental space, if firmly fixed to sound humanitarian principles, is your most powerful resource. It will permit you to harness your knowledge and to dedicate your privileged position to the betterment of all. For the

first time in history, privilege may prove to be a constructive force, without negative effects.

You of this extraordinary generation are the gyroscopes of this era - contributing the equilibrium and making the course corrections required for the survival of our species. On your successes will depend the future of the rest of us. Those successes, in turn, depend upon your response to two questions which I wish to leave with you.

- 1. Are we willing to remain the product of what we have been?

or

- 2. Can we believe in what we may become?

I'm no prophet, but I'm betting on you. Good luck. And congratulations.

Exerpts on pp. 2, 6, 13 are from "Redemption Song"
written by Bob Marley. Copyright 1980 Bob Marley Music,
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