

ARTS & SCIENCE PROGRAM 35th ANNIVERSARY TALK
DR. GARY WARNER, 15 OCT. 2016, MCMASTER UNIVERSITY

I have had the privilege and pleasure of serving for two stints as ARTS & SCIENCE Director, first a regular 5-year term (2000 -2005) and later for a 1-year term (2010-2011), during Jean Wilson's research leave prior to her beginning her term as ARTS & SCIENCE Director. I also was fortunate enough to maintain contact with the program post-retirement as an instructor or guest lecturer for the 1C06 course, as an instructor for the Global Justice Inquiry course focused on Water and member of the Global Justice Hub Advisory Committee. So I will know some of you through those connections, through the 1C06 Inquiry course in the two years before I started as Director, or through encounters at occasions such as this one. I want you all to know how happy I have been to be involved as a member of the ARTS & SCIENCE family.

Whenever I have been asked to describe the ARTS & SCIENCE Program, I have characterized it as a community of interdisciplinary learning and ethical public engagement. The sense of community is a function of many factors, notably the size of the Program and the culture of collaborative relationships. One brings an open curious mind to a community of learning in which all are sharers and recipients of insights. We know that interdisciplinary learning is a lifelong habit and skill that graduates of the Program have been carrying everywhere with them – enabling them to envisage multiple perspectives, find the right questions to ask, see beyond immediate appearances, and delve into sometimes conflicting evidence to make informed judgments. Self-directed learning is also known to enable attitudes and behaviours that foster initiative, imagination and creativity.

I have always been impressed by the degree to which ARTS & SCIENCE students are typically imbued with a strong sense of idealism and a desire to make positive change. I see this culture of a “community of interdisciplinary learning and ethical public engagement” alive in the strong commitment to community service, in the sense of shared community, in the readiness to ask questions that are not bound by disciplinary borders, in the willingness to be self-critical and engage in discovery of self and the human experience. I see it in the lives of Artsci alumni engaged in a wide variety of careers and life choices. This is cause for celebration.

I had the opportunity about 4 years ago to go to Pittsburgh to learn about a program that was being investigated at the time as a possible model for a major investment in an educational focus here in Hamilton by the Hamilton Community Foundation. This Promise program, as it was named, included a focus on skills identified as requisite for students to succeed in a 21st century global economy and society. These skills were identified as problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, creativity, collaboration, self-directed learning, a mindset of continuous improvement, and the ability to make ethical and moral judgments. Sounds familiar? Interestingly, a Task Force that I chaired on Future Directions for the Faculties of Humanities, Social Science and Science at McMaster University during the past academic year recommended in the same vein that all graduating undergraduate students should have been exposed to multiple disciplines in a way that fosters an interdisciplinary awareness and should have acquired a number of core competencies including “cultural literacy, numeracy, critical thinking skills, a student's self-awareness of her or his place in our broader society and the world, and the ability to communicate effectively across a number of different media, including writing and speaking.” It strikes me that as this broader educational vision is gradually being increasingly regarded as desirable across the university, the ARTS & SCIENCE Program continues to be a privileged site for seeing it implemented effectively in practice.

The culture of ethical public engagement alluded to earlier as characterizing the ARTS & SCIENCE Program also brings with it a challenge – the challenge of addressing, with the means at our disposal and in the context of our personal and professional lives, the dominant crises of our times. It seems that as a world community we are at a crossroads, a time of global crisis. Three overarching crises stand out. One is economic globalization which is driven by neoliberal economics and acts as a bulldozer, invading all areas of existence, imposing its rules, structures and values (profitability, utility, efficiency etc.), a seemingly inevitable impersonal system in which human beings are at the service of an insatiable market.

A second manifestation of this global crisis is the deep and growing patterns of inequality within and between countries, with one fifth of the world's population devouring 80% of the world's resources and the 1% commandeering the lion's share. These patterns of inequality and power imbalances have class, racial, ethnic, gender, spatial and other dimensions that are sometimes overlooked or underestimated. I was reminded recently while on excursions in Quebec and Nova Scotia of the extent to which the presence of Aboriginal peoples is erased from the general consciousness. Tour guides and brochures typically made little or no mention of the historical or contemporary presence of First Nations peoples, for example the Mi'kmaq in Nova Scotia and the Gaspé peninsula.

Thirdly, we face an ecological crisis that threatens human existence, leaving no room to envisage the world as our common home – you are familiar with its many manifestations – global warming, disruption of ecosystems, etc. etc. Naomi Klein's [This Changes Everything](#) and Pope Francis' [Laudato Si](#) are recent powerful articulations of this ecological threat.

The 3 above-mentioned crises are interrelated. They also contribute to creating or exacerbating conditions that foster resource-driven conflict fuelled by ethnic, religious or other rivalries, foster structural or armed violence, and the unprecedented mass migration of refugees that we witness today – in other words conditions that are the antithesis of a Culture of Peace.

All of these big issues have both local and global manifestations. It strikes me that ARTS & SCIENCE alumni are particularly well placed, because of the attributes that I described above, to discern what actions lie in their power to have a positive effect with regard to all of these issues.

Henry Giroux in a column published 3 days ago in the Hamilton Spectator asked: "What happens to a society when thinking becomes an object of contempt and is disdained in favour of raw emotion?... What happens when the spheres of morality and spirituality give way to the naked instrumentalism of a savage market rationality?... What happens to a polity when it retreats into private silos and is no longer able to connect personal suffering with larger social issues?" He concluded with the thought that now may be again the time for what he calls dangerous thinking. "Dangerous thinking ... is the basis for a formative and educational culture of questioning and politics that takes seriously how the imagination can become central to the practice of freedom, justice, and democratic change."

Imagining the practice of freedom, justice and democratic change flows easily from a deeply internalized sense of our mutuality, indeed of the interconnectedness of all life, what Ilia Delio in her book ***Making All Things New*** terms 'quantum consciousness'. Martin Luther King understood this interconnection when he wrote: "We are caught up in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly... I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be." This same sense of mutuality is operative in the words of Aboriginal Australian activist, Lilla Watson, that some of

you will have often heard me quote: “If you have come to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

Chilean economist Manfred Max-Neef has written that, in order to live fulfilled lives, we all as human beings have a finite number of fundamental needs which are interconnected and interactive. In addition to subsistence or survival, our fundamental human needs include the need for understanding, participation, creation, identity, affection, recreation, protection, and freedom. An encounter that I had about 20 years ago with a man named Carl Upchurch at a talk that I attended at McMaster University and that has left an indelible impression on me illustrates this proposition. Carl Upchurch, a former gang member, explained in his talk how he had arrived at an understanding of the oppression that had corrupted his sense of identity and had led him to a life of crime. His self-awakening was sparked, surprisingly enough, by reading a sonnet by Shakespeare from a book that happened to be propping up a table in his prison cell. Carl was able to reform himself, go from a school dropout to a university graduate and become an advocate for civil rights and a worker with troubled youth. By his death in 2003 at the age of 53, Carl Upchurch was the recipient of many awards for his community work and had achieved national stature in the US. Carl’s experience speaks volumes about the power of art, literature and beauty to nourish our lives and help meet deep-seated human needs of self-actualization, and in our finer moments, self-transcendence. This appreciation of art, literature and beauty is one of the essential dimensions interwoven in the ARTS & SCIENCE Program.

In conclusion, I join everyone present here in celebrating 35 years of an ARTS & SCIENCE Program and community that have sustained their vitality. I salute the spirit of idealism, altruism and compassion that has struck me over the years as so characteristic of ARTS & SCIENCE students. We celebrate in a special way the visionaries, President Alvin Lee, Vice-President Les King, and the father of the Program, Herb Jenkins, who brought this Program into existence and nurtured it. And we look forward to the strengthening of the Artsci alumni network and the ongoing development and renewal of the ARTS & SCIENCE Program in the years ahead under the leadership of its long-standing, award-winning instructor and current Director, Jean Wilson. As we celebrate the past, we look to the future with hope and confidence.

Gary Warner
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