

**Address on receipt of an Honorary Doctorate from the  
University of York, United Kingdom**

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**The University of York**

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The Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, colleagues and graduands

Thank you for the singular honour of this Honorary Doctorate. It being awarded by my own alma mater makes it all the more special.

This award, however, is less about achievements on my part as much as it is about the historical circumstances that have shaped me and also provided me wonderful opportunities and privileges over the years.

I am a proud South African and African. I have been assisted by remarkable Africans, black and white, men and women, intellectuals, scholars and workers to acquire knowledge and through them I have come to develop a passionate love for my country and the African continent.

My parents, despite having limited formal education, instilled in me a love for reading and knowledge and were models of integrity.

My partner and sons have supported me in countless ways over the years and have long borne the burden of my social commitments.

The scourges of apartheid and colonialism propelled me into national student and political activism and leadership. This involvement provided a marvellous non-formal education in ethics, discipline, organisational development and politics in the company of many extraordinary people who occupy key positions in government, civil society and business today.

From workers in trade unions I learnt the vital culture of democratic practice. They also ignited in me a passion for educating.

In the mid-1980s the University of York provided a safe and secure space for me to revive my desire to become a scholar, and on my return home the University of Western Cape provided me an exhilarating environment for teaching, research and leadership that few other institutions could have offered a young Black scholar.

The late scholar, Harold Wolpe, contributed powerfully to my intellectual and scholarly development, and to my uncompromising view that we must never sacrifice research and science to politics, and must fiercely guard the autonomy of intellectual work against any attempts to harness it to narrow political ends.

As the first head of the higher education advisory body to the Minister of Education, between 1999 and 2006 I had the great

privilege of contributing to the shaping of national higher education policy and reshaping the post-apartheid higher education landscape alongside outstanding and dedicated intellectuals and professionals.

*Higher* education is an immensely valuable public and social good. Yet, today, there are strident calls that universities should prioritise 'skills' and emphasise professional, vocational and career-focused qualifications and programmes and misguided attempts to harness universities to serve economic growth alone.

It is not disputed that universities must cultivate the knowledge, competencies and skills that enable graduates to contribute to economic development. Yet an instrumental approach to higher education which reduces its value to its efficacy for economic growth is to denude it of its considerably wider social value and functions.

For one, higher education has an intrinsic significance as an engagement between dedicated academics and students around humanity's intellectual, cultural and scientific inheritances and around our historical and contemporary understandings, views and beliefs regarding our natural and social worlds.

For another, higher education also has immense social and political value. As Martha Nussbaum argues, education is intimately connected to the idea of democratic citizenship, and to the “cultivation of humanity”.

Finally, higher education also has profound value for the promotion of health and well-being, the assertion and pursuit of social and human rights and active democratic participation.

These wider social purposes of higher education are vital in a contemporary world where “the promise of human rights and the vision of a just and caring world remains an illusion”, where “intolerance, war and impunity; starvation and greed; power and powerlessness all combine in a conspiracy of the powerful against the weak that invariably deepens the faultlines that exist in the world and within nations”, where there is “shock and outrage at arbitrary killing” but complicity “in the killing of many more thorough hunger and disease”, and where a “reasonable utilitarianism” has given way to crass materialism and “narcissistic hedonism”.

In the *Algebra of Infinite Justice*, Arundathi Roy writes that

the only dream worth having ...is to dream  
that you will live while you're alive and only  
die when you're dead

This, she says, means

...to love. To be loved. To never get used  
to the unspeakable violence and vulgar  
disparity of life around you. To respect  
strength, never power. Above all, to watch.  
To try and understand. To never look  
away. And never, never to forget.

This award is a spur to jealously guarding the wider social  
purposes of the university, to 'never forget' or 'look away', or  
'get used to' injustice and to ensure that people "live while  
they're alive and only die when they're dead".

Thank you.