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The price of privilege St. George's, Grenada*

First let me thank Chancellor Modica for his gracious invitation to deliver this address and the warmth with which he and his colleagues have received me. Next, let me congratulate the new graduates on having reached this milestone. It is a great relief to have achieved this, but I say milestone advisedly as I hope that many of you will continue to follow in one way or another the intellectual pursuits that you began here.

It is always a pleasure to come to Grenada and there must be few more beautiful sites in the island than the True Blue campus of your University. This is not my first visit to the University, I came here 32 years ago when it was only a medical school, and I recall the temporary facilities on Grand Anse and wondering if the students would find the almost idyllic surroundings conducive to study. I also commented then on the relevance of the school to the health care needs of the Caribbean and if it would ever become grounded in the Caribbean. It is refreshing to note how you have grown, the number of disciplines you now embrace beside medicine and the number of Caribbean students who are enrolled in your programs. But perhaps the students in arts and sciences have better powers of concentration and are less distracted than the medical students-at least those of thirty years ago. Or indeed, all students here have heeded Alfred Toynbee's dictum that "*The supreme accomplishment is to blur the line between work and play*". I really do hope you have benefitted from the beauty of the physical surroundings as a complement to the excellent courses of instruction that have been offered.

As is the case with all good universities, you have been protected and almost cosseted during your stay here and are now ready to face a world which to every fresh set of graduates is brave and new. All of you will have heard and read of the difficulties faced by Caribbean countries-some of them intrinsic to their own situation and some as a result of external conditions, particularly the financial ones.

If it is any comfort to you, let me recall an address given by a former Vice-Chancellor of the University of the West Indies some thirty years ago which could have been written today. He described the University of the West Indies as being located in a region of the world that is "*passing through an economic crisis, revealed by multiple symptoms-unemployment, inflation, falling growth rates, energy shortages etc*". But he went on to say: "*these symptoms are not*

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new to us in the West Indies, excepting perhaps in their intensity and we are in the habit of looking beyond them to their causes to see the whole as a challenge of development". You all remember the old saw, *"The more things change, the more they remain the same."* He would analyze the role of the University in responding to those challenges. It is in the same vein that I wish to explore with you the role you can play in responding to some of these development challenges, as students before you from other universities in our region and certainly those from my own university have done and continue to do.

I begin by affirming that you are and will continue to be in a privileged position. You represent only a fraction of the cohort of persons who can benefit from higher education and this applies to Caribbean students as well as those from other parts of the world. I believe that there is a responsibility that comes with this privilege –there is a price for this privilege, although in this transaction I expect you to pay this price not only for the benefits you have received until now, but particularly for the continuing benefits that will accrue to you as a result of having studied and been trained here.

I discovered after I had chosen this theme that the "Price of Privilege" is the title of a book by an American psychologist who explores why wealth in the family can produce anxious, depressed teenagers. They are so taken up with objects that they never concentrate on deeper issues and never build the character necessary to take them through life. But I intend to think of the issue as it relates to universities, rather than families.

The currency in which you will pay this price of privilege has compassion, engagement and commitment among its highest denominations. As you pay in the coin of compassion, remember never to take lightly the fact that for most of you, as it was for most of my generation, the great majority are from families in which a university graduate represents the exception rather than the rule. That clearly is changing, but the change could be much more rapid.

Paying the price means you must never take lightly the responsibility of transmitting relevant information to those who do not have it. The idea or practice of information transmission has seen many phases. Mankind has always been concerned with the dual problem of his physical transportation and the transmission of his ideas. We have seen progressive growth in the capacity to do both although to date we have not been successful, as in Star Trek, of beaming one person from one place to another. When we moved primarily on foot, we depended on the heralds and minstrels to carry the words and images of our deeds. But in addition we used signals of one sort or another to try to shackle distance. We read of the smoke signals of ancient tribes and some of us have heard the talking drums of our African ancestors-the gangan of the Yorubas and the kalangu of the Hausas.

The enhanced transportation of man and his goods is now almost without limits as the physical world is stitched together by ships of ever increasing size, some of which compete with the birds for their space. Of equal significance is the increasing sophistication in the transmission of ideas. The technology of communication changes with mind-numbing speed. Our computers talk to one another. The world is becoming ever more interconnected and that is the driving force behind the much discussed and analyzed phenomenon of globalization which is really not new. It is the speed at which we are being connected and the technology that makes this possible that

bring up serious reflection on the roles you can play. A major issue for you in this interconnected and plugged-in world is the role you play and the responsibility you exercise as you take part in transmitting information as undoubtedly many of you will occupy positions of influence and authority in your countries. One of your concerns is how do you protect the values and mores of our societies as you transmit information through the tried and true methods or through new means such as social networking?

The urge to transmit information to the young seems to be hard wired into most species. See the duck instructing her young as they follow in line behind her. The responsibility of transmitting the appropriate information to the young has been taken seriously by man throughout the ages. Socrates was put to death because he was deemed to be corrupting the young by the information he was transmitting to them. So as a privileged graduate I expect you to contribute to the body of information in your society-to use the skills you have acquired here and the talents you have honed here to participate in sharing information for the creation of a better society. You will not be diminished by sharing information, as in the words of Thomas Jefferson;

“He who receives an idea from me receives instruction himself without lessening mine; as he who lights his taper at mine, receives light without darkening me.”

Perhaps this is a responsibility of all good men and women, but I place a special charge on those of you who have had the benefit of higher education.

But the information you share is not value-free. It will have an impact on how you and your fellow human beings relate to one another. This country is fortunate that it is not subject to much of the racial disharmony that besets some others. There are however other forms of intolerance and discrimination that demean a society. I wear another hat as the UN Secretary-General’s Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in the Caribbean and have for years observed the state of the epidemic and tried to add my mite to the efforts to control it. There has been progress. The Caribbean governments have been good about providing for those persons who are HIV positive and need treatment as their disease progresses. But we have not done equally well in terms of prevention although as in all programs of prevention it is impossible to prove the counterfactual.

It is a belief shared by many of us that the stigma and discrimination attendant on homosexuality and the false notion that homosexual transmission is the dominant form are impeding the efforts to control the epidemic. We know that men who have sex with men represent a group with higher incidence of HIV positivity and the fear that such persons have about the stigma and discrimination that they suffer makes it difficult for them to come forward to be tested. It is an unfortunate fact that all but one of the Caribbean countries have laws on their books that make sex between consenting males a crime severely punishable by law. I would hope that within a university there would be a spirit and practice of tolerance that would be embraced and shared by its graduates so that surely, even if slowly we would see a change in the attitudes that lead to the discrimination against a group of persons with whose life style some do not agree. I hope some of you will accept the challenge of trying to engender the societal change needed to remove this phenomenon from our countries.

One of the questions that all graduates have to answer for themselves relates to the benefit of their higher education. There is the view that most of higher education represents a purely private as opposed to being a public good to the extent that its benefits accrue specifically to the individual. In that sense it makes the graduate more marketable and there is no need for him or her to consider anything else besides maximizing the returns from this good. As I am sure you know, a public good can be thought of as a good or service in which the benefit received by any one party does not diminish the availability of the benefits to others, and where access to the good cannot be restricted. Traffic lights are always cited as the classic example of a public good.

A university education provides benefits that go beyond the individual graduate. I have always posited that that is one reason for alumni to support their university and I would propose that it is another part of the price you should pay for the privilege of having attended this university. Your university, to the extent that it is engaged in teaching as well as research produces information that is of societal value, is producing public goods. To the extent that it fosters the kind of inquiry and curiosity that is essential for societal health then it is providing a service that is within the category of public good. This is not to deny your commitment to the institution because you have an interest in ensuring that the currency of your own credential remains valid. The validity of that currency will be a determinant of the extent to which you reap rewards from your education here. You are all aware of the differential in earnings generally between those who have received tertiary education from those who have not.

The notion of university education being uniquely a private good has been in part responsible for the tremendous growth of institutions of higher education with out walls, whose sole function is credentialing. However, I still see immense value in having at least part of the training of the young involve interaction with each other and with teachers with whom they can interact to use a popular phrase 'live and direct'. So I trust you will pay the price of the privilege of being educated here by being good alumni. You must support your university; you must be committed to seeing it continue and prosper.

There is one last charge I wish to leave with you and another rationale for supporting higher education in general and your university in particular. Mankind throughout the ages has had periods which in retrospect were a denial of our basic humanity. We can think of places in which there has been brutality that we here in the Caribbean find it hard to conceive and sometimes we are arrogant enough to believe that it cannot happen here. But as we see the escalation in violence in some of our societies we begin to wonder. We see increasing violence in our speech, our music and our dress. I saw recently a young man wearing a T-shirt with the words "Top Shotta" on the chest. Shotta is the jargon for a gunman-a killer.

A recent report on crime violence and development in the Caribbean, examined the trends, costs and policy options. There is no doubt that crime and violence represent a major drag on our development. The causes are many and varied and the report stressed the multiple entry points for engaging in the prevention of crime and violence. It stated"

“There is no one “ideal” approach. The common denominator is that successful interventions are evidence-based, starting with a clear diagnostic about types of violence and risk factors, and ending with a careful evaluation of the intervention’s impact which will inform future actions.”

Here obviously is a role for academic institutions and my own University is dedicating considerable effort in this direction.

There is the belief that we are inherently competitive and violent and there is a thin veneer of civility that keeps the world from descending into barbarism. I believe that it is education and the presence of institutions such as ours that have a critical role in maintaining and thickening that veneer. I do not mean to suggest that we diminish moral autonomy or shift moral responsibility away from the individual, but I do believe that it is in the multiple diversities in a university that we can find part of the solution.

Finally, let me say thanks to the parents and friends of the new graduates. I know that this must be a joyous day for you and some of you are breathing a sigh of relief that the fight appears to be over and the battle won. However, I ask that you continue to support your new graduates as they go out into the world. They will continue to need it. Perhaps not financial support, but the counsel that comes from a concerned friend or elder in moments of doubt can be of inestimable value.

I hope you will assure me that the privilege you have had through attending St.George’s University will not lead to the depression, anxiety and narcissistic behavior seen in the children of the affluent who pay the price of privilege as described in the book to which I referred.

Let me thank you again for the opportunity to be with you and I wish you much luck

Mr. Speaker;