

Patrick – Retirement Gathering Speech – May 11, 2023

Good Afternoon...

It is such a delight and an honor to welcome all of you here today.

When Alena asked me about this party, I said, “Sure, why not?”

—This is a response some suggest I may have given a little *too often* during my career at Western.... But, happily, for this purpose, I hadn’t learned my lesson!

I told Alena that I would love a gathering, as long as I didn’t have to speak last!

Besides this being indicative of my need for control -- and also my not wanting to possibly be a puddle before my turn to speak,

I felt that the opportunity to *welcome you*, who have come to honor me, could also be my chance to *honor you*, too.

As I look out in the room I see so many people that I have had the great pleasure to work alongside, the benefit of being creatively stimulated by, and sometimes the important *challenge to find common ground* with.

To me, this sort of gathering is really about *us* – the collective.

In that regard, I’m reminded of how my friend & colleague from the French department, Henri Boyi, in his course on Rwanda, (which focuses on the genocide and where students work in Rwandan communities), teaches the students about the meaning of *Ubuntu*.

As many know, it is a Bantu philosophical term that means ‘I am because you are,’ a concept of mutual human kindness.

Henri said in an article on Western’s website from 2019:

“No matter where we come from or what we do, we are part of one large family which supports each other in becoming the best versions of ourselves, for mutual growth and the benefit of the collective.”

This resonates with me – hoping, as I have done, to embrace such a collective orientation over my 28 years at Western.

Yes, 28 years.... I came here from the West Coast in July 1995 with my wife, Barb, and our son Thomas (at 3 years of age), and Christopher (the tall redhead over there), who was just getting ready to be born later that very month. Barb and I had lived widely throughout Western Canada, and in the North, and I had a rich educational background that included an MFA from UBC...and a range of experiences *working in communities*.

I probably did not, at the time, recognize those community undertakings as being so educationally significant to me – that would happen gradually.

I should add that coming to Western in 1995 seemed like a good fit for me. Parenthetically, the vast majority of the people here then *looked* and seemed to *think* in ways that were a rather similar to my own.

At the time, I suppose I recognized both the *comfort*, and the lack of an important kind of *discomfort* that the University had for me. That character of the University has changed somewhat over time, and is doing so more significantly today, thankfully.

The foregoing notwithstanding, in 1995 to be an *artist* at Western was to experience a certain discomfort in relation to the apparent mission of the university. Of course Western was not the only post-secondary setting at that point where art-making was often a bit suspect!

Having said that, there was a significant legacy of Visual Arts studio work and historical study that had gone on here for 28 years... but with many retirements having recently occurred, it was a period when the Visual Arts Department seemed somewhat disconnected from the University and the community, both.

Thankfully my now dear friend Madeline Lennon, an established art history faculty member, was the incoming Chair when I arrived, and David Merritt and Kim Moodie were among the studio ranks.

But it was a time of need. And as one of the artists on faculty, I saw that we were more readily thought about as the ones to ask to design the *poster* for a conference rather than to give a talk.

Now, I won't give you the litany on how things changed over the succeeding years, but I do want to say something about why I think it is that we as a Visual Arts Department gradually came to identify our *purpose* so substantially.

To get at that, I want to first remind myself and you that I was then, and continue to be, a practicing artist! (This is my work! – thanks to Strand Fine Art for all the framing... some of it as recently as three weeks ago.)

But what does being a practicing artist really mean? (Now this the part where some members of my family may be getting uneasy, imagining that I might wax on a bit too long and spoil a perfectly lovely afternoon – so I'll try to be brief at this.)

Speaking as an artist, I'll tell you how I think about purpose:

I don't set an objective goal for myself (though sometimes I wish I did), and nor does my 5 year plan have benchmarks or milestones... actually, I don't have a 5-year plan!

But I do have 'intention.' Of course that's something that we hear about in many sectors these days.

For most artists *intention* has a particular cast...

A wonderful recent book, recommended to me by my colleague, Sky Glabush, entitled *The Creative Act*, includes this description by music producer Rick Rubin:

"An intention is more than a conscious purpose... it is the congruence of a purpose which requires an alignment of all aspects of oneself -- of conscious thought and unconscious beliefs...."

...of capabilities and commitment to actions when working {as an artist} and not... it's a state of living in harmonic agreement with oneself.

And Rubin adds: *Not all projects take time, but they do take a lifetime."*

For myself, applying this kind of thinking to my role in the University didn't mean that this language was on our mission statement when I was Chair (we didn't have one),

Nor when I was Director of the School for Advanced Studies in the Arts & Humanities (though we did have a mission statement).

But I like to think that the kind of integration Rubin alludes to was at the heart of the various initiatives that I was fortunate to work on with so many of you over the years.

Whether it was in the linkages we seek within our programs across art history, studio and museum studies, and the intellectual and creative sharing among colleagues.

- in the ways so many of us and our students connect to the wider University, community, and the artworld,

Or in the ways we as creators and scholars in Visual Arts (as well as in the SASAH program where I worked for 3 ½ years), try to make the University more permeable and mobile, rather than a bastion or fortress of knowledge....

--In those contexts, I believe I've sought a spirit of alignment between conscious thought and unconscious beliefs,

...and, I would add, between conscious thought and *embodied and intergenerational knowledges and practices, within a framework that upholds social justice.*

...As an important aside, I think what I'm describing truly resonates in a wonderful exhibition which is on right now – just down the glass hallway, in the ArtLab.

Initiated by Department Chair, Alena Robin, curated by PhD student, Asher Mobeen, and featuring our newest colleagues Soheila Esfahani, Jessica Karuhanga, and Sheri Nault, the project and its spirit embodies a quality of integration on numerous levels.

I suggest you give the show – indeed, *the experience of the show*, which Asher so thoughtfully emphasizes – some of your time today.

And, as I encourage that, I want to say a very special thank-you to our Dean (and my friend) Michael Milde, and others among the upper administration, President Alan Shepherd, Provost Florentine Strelczyk, and Vice Provost Christy Bressette, who have supported and assisted our Department, and have recently made possible the hirings this exhibition shines a light on.

I mentioned earlier that the education that I had prior to coming here was 'in the world,' as well as the University.

Barb and I met as teachers in a street school program in Winnipeg in the early 80's and we subsequently taught for two years in an Inuit community of 250 people in what is now Nunavut, in the late 1980's.

Following that, we moved to Vancouver where my first part-time job was teaching calligraphy to seniors at the Jewish Community Centre -- some of the results were a bit shaky!

Nevertheless, teaching was then and has continued to be about finding new ways to adapt and innovate.

In that sense, coming to London and Western in 1995 (from Victoria) meant starting anew, and so, connecting here was, importantly, a gradual process of "education in and with the community" and of friendship-building.

The amazing artistic legacy and living practices that had flourished in London, earlier with Greg Curnoe and others, and continuingly with Jamelie Hassan & Ron Benner & Embassy Cultural House, as well as with Wyn Geleynse, Thelma Rosner and so many more, helped me to identify with this vibrant community, which has sometimes reminded me of the art scene I had experienced in Winnipeg prior to leaving in 1986.

It does need to be said that, lo those many years before and after I got here, artists and colleagues David Merritt and Kim Moodie, and Tricia Johnson, and Madeline

Lennon and John Hatch and others, kept a light in the window in terms of making the connection between the University and the London community.

Also, when I arrived here and subsequently, the McIntosh Gallery at Western, and Museum London were significant contexts where I found mutual opportunities and supports, and where ongoing art stewardship, care and leadership helped strengthen the art and cultural spheres locally and far beyond.... as they continue to do in remarkable ways. We all owe them a debt of our gratitude for that.

To pick up a bit further on the topic of *intention and integration*, I want to add that the sort of learning I had done in communities prior to coming here has ultimately flowered while I've been in London and at Western, in ways I could never have imagined.

The project *Art & Cold Cash* with Ruby Argnanaaq, Jack Butler, Sheila Butler and William Noah, and *Immersion Emergencies and Possible Worlds* (about water), with Gu Xiong, Soheila Esfahani and many other artists, taught me so much about true collaboration and shared vision.

And recently, *GardenShip and State*, co-curated by my good friend and collaborator Jeff Thomas, and involving 20 artists & scholars at Museum London, and in the wider community, taught me more than I could have dreamed.

Jeff brought to our project the Two-Row Treaty of 1613... and he said this about it: *"My Mohawk ancestors and the European newcomers (the Dutch) wanted to formulate an agreement of mutual respect for each other's society."*

Although the Dutch wanted to form a typical treaty with themselves being recognized as the father, the Haudenosaunee insisted on being treated as equal partners and not positioned as children, formulating a template for respectful co-existence.

The concept of peaceful co-existence is the curatorial pillar used for Gardenship and State... The Two Row was passed to me by my elders and now to the artists, writers, Museum London, and the public."

This is from our forthcoming book, and Jeff was happy for me to share it with you today.

And I want to mention something else from that project that also continues to resonate with me, and my sense of intentionality.

A wonderful contribution to our panel discussion on Women and Colonization, hosted by my colleague Nandi Bhatia, and by gifted collaborator, Ruth Skinner – at the CONFLUENCES Symposium in March 2023

...involved a reflection by Jamelie Hassan -- commenting on the role that art and culture play in change making:

"I'm not part of those people who say art cannot make change happen... that we cannot transform the negative into a positive.... I'm not part of that thinking at all. I believe that our collective work together has had a powerful impact on the thinking of a younger generation."

Jamelie: I believe that, too.

So, friends, I have gone on too long ... attempting to paint a picture of my experience here at Western and in London, and hoping to acknowledge the 'us' that brought the colour and life to the work.

So now, with the intention of being as inclusive as I can be :

I want to thank our Chair, Alena Robin, and my amazing colleagues in Art History, Studio and Museum Studies, present and retired!

...For being such generous, copasetic and inspiring allies.

I can say that I was rarely ever at a meeting where a sense of the shared collective good did not prevail. I thank each one of you sincerely.

---To our Staff here in VA, whose work enables us to deliver our very best to the students and the community, you are the glue that keeps all the parts connected. Thank you.

To the students all: those I have mentored in the PhD, (Michelle Wilson, Ashley Snook, Michael Farnan... and many others); in the MFA program, including Joscelyn Gardiner, Gabriella Solti, Sharmistha Kar & George Kubresli-- and in our classes -- you are our lifeblood.

To the amazing SASAH, its team of Jen Tramble & Barb Bruce with the founding and current Directors, Joel Faflak, +Aara Suksi, -- its circulating faculty, and former guest instructors Shelley Niro, Jamelie Hassan & David Simmonds... never was there a more happy and timely opportunity for me when than when I was given the chance to work with you. (Thanks, Michael!)

Speaking of which: To the Dean's Office, for all you do for us; the Upper Administration; and so many colleagues, collaborators and staff throughout campus who have been so kind and interested over the years.... I honour you.

And to London Art-makers and Storytellers and Change-makers: Tom Cull, Kelley Green, Quinn Smallboy, Embassy Cultural House, Judith Rodger, Josh Lambier, Dan & Mary Lou Smoke, and all the many more, you are amazing.

My heartfelt thanks to Liza Eurich and Dickson Bou for the exhibition.

---And to all those who planned and organized this wonderful event, and you who have come, it means so much!

And lastly to My Family: Barb (you should have been on the payroll many days – not least for therapeutic work and party planning), Thomas (in New York), Chris (here) & Emily...
---Paul Mahon (my 'little brother,' who joins us, thanks, Paul), my other siblings, and my beloved parents, now deceased.
My Love & Deep Appreciation.

.....My friends, I have had a blast at Western ... was it perfect?
Not even close!

But in the wise words of the late Thich Nhat Hanh:
No Mud, No Lotus