LET ME BEGIN by saying how deeply honored I am by the honorary degree you have conferred upon me and by the invitation to deliver the commencement address at a university for which I have such respect and affection. And let me apologize for speaking entirely in English, my French having suffered the disuse of living in a land so vast that bilingualism is considered, except for the newest of immigrants, an exotic intellectual acquirement.

Antoine de Rivarol once said: "Ce qui n'est pas clair n'est pas français." I shall not be français. But I hope to be clair. Even more important, given the fact that after long years of sweat and study I am the last thing that stands between you and your diploma, I shall be brief.

Exactly twenty-three years ago, in this very building, I was sitting in your seat. What I shall offer you today is a reconnaissance report from a two-decade life expedition into the world beyond McGill College Avenue. Like Marco Polo, I return—but without silk, with few stories, indeed, with but three pieces of sage advice.

First, don't lose your head. I'm speaking here of intellectual fashion, of the alarming regularity with which the chattering classes, that herd of independent minds, are swept away by the periodic enthusiasms that wash over the culture.

Not a decade ago, for example, the West was seized with a near-mass hysteria about imminent nuclear apocalypse. Tens of millions of my compatriots, including the intellectuals who should have known better, were in the grip of a nuclear anxiety attack. The airwaves, the bestseller lists, the Congress were filled with dire warnings about our headlong dash to the nuclear abyss. It was quite a scene.
A political movement rose to avert the End. It was the nuclear freeze movement and its slogan was "The freeze: Because no one wants a nuclear war," as if those who resisted the freeze were in favor of nuclear war. Indeed, those who refused to lose their heads to the hysteria were diagnosed as suffering from some psychological disorder. "Nuclearism," "psychic numbing" it was called.

Ten years later, with nuclear weapons still capable of destroying the world many times over—not a word about the coming apocalypse. The fever has passed.

But not the propensity for fever. Another day, another fever. With the end of the Cold War, with nuclear apocalypse now out of fashion, the vacuum is filled by eco-catastrophists predicting a coming doomsday of uncontrollable pollution, overpopulation, and resource depletion.

Some prefer their catastrophes more mundane. For them there is economic apocalypse. Look at the best seller list. It is hard to think of a time when it did not feature a Crash of Nineteen-something book. A few years ago, it was The Crash of '79. Then The Panic of '89. (Same author, by the way.) Today it is Bankruptcy 1995. The idea is the same. Only the date gets pushed back.

Do not misunderstand. There is a nuclear problem, especially in the form of nuclear proliferation. There are environmental problems. And every society has economic problems. But there is a difference between a problem and panic.

So the next time you find yourself in the midst of some national hysteria with sensible people losing their heads, with legislatures in panic, and with the media buying it all and amplifying it with a kind of megaphone effect, remember this:

Remember that a people—even the most sensible people—can all lose their heads at once.

Remember the tulip craze that swept Holland three centuries ago, an orgy of panicked financial speculation in which, as historian Simon Schama tells it, "tracts of land, houses, silver and gold vessels and fine furniture were all commonly traded" for tulips. At the mania's peak, a single Semper Augustus tulip could fetch twenty townhouses.

Remember that when the people or the legislature or the media approve something with unanimity, they're probably wrong. Remember the Gulf of Tonkin resolution which essentially launched the United States into the Vietnam war. It passed the U.S. Senate 88 to 2. It passed the House 410 to 0. That should have been a warning.
In the old Soviet Union, where the commissars would routinely rewrite and rearrange history to fit their political needs, there was a saying: In Russia, it is impossible to predict the past. In Israel, at the time of hyperinflation some years ago, it was said: In Israel, it was impossible to predict the present. Well, in the normal, bourgeois, middle-class, democratic West, one should say, when confronted with the apocalypse du jour: Here, it is impossible to predict the future. So when confronted with a national riot of dread: Keep your head.

LESSON ONE. LESSON TWO: Look outward. By that I mean: Don’t look inward too much. You have been taught—rightly taught—Socrates’ dictum that the unexamined life is not worth living. I would add: The too-examined life is not worth living either.

Perhaps previous ages suffered from a lack of self-examination. The Age of Oprah does not. Our problem is quite the opposite.

One of the defining features of modernity is self-consciousness: psychological self-consciousness as popularized by Freud; historical self-consciousness as introduced by Hegel and Marx; literary self-consciousness as practiced in the interior, self-absorbed, self-referential world of modern fiction.

We live in an age in which the highest moral injunction is to get in touch with one’s feelings. Speaking as a psychiatrist—well, a psychiatrist in remission—I can assure you that this is a highly overrated pursuit.

The reigning cliché of the day is that in order to love others one must first learn to love oneself. This formulation—Love thyself, then thy neighbor—is a license for unremitting self-indulgence, because the quest for self-love is endless. By the time you have finally learned to love yourself, you’ll find yourself playing golf at Leisure World, having outlived those you might have loved.

“Love thy neighbor” was supposed to be the hard part of the biblical injunction. Sometimes it seems as if all of America is working on the “thysell” part—almost a definition of narcissism.

In my country, this obsession with self-regard has deeply affected modern pedagogy. A recent international study compared the mathematical proficiency of thirteen-year-olds in six advanced countries. The United States ranked last in mathematical ability, Korea first. The kids were then asked to rate how good they thought they were at math. The Americans were number one.
They couldn't add, but they felt good about themselves. In other words, they were a modern pedagogical success, the principal aim of primary education today being to instill students with self-esteem. Reading, maybe. Writing, perhaps. Arithmetic, someday. But self-esteem above all. There seems to be no conception that perhaps self-esteem follows achievement. It is what comes with a sense of mastery.

The story is told of the Sultan who awoke in the middle of the night and summoned his wizard. "Wizard," he said, "my sleep is troubled. Tell me: What is holding up the earth?"

"Majesty," replied the wizard, "the earth rests on the back of a giant elephant."

The Sultan was satisfied and went back to sleep. He then awoke in a cold sweat and called the wizard back immediately. "Wizard," he said, "what's holding up the elephant?"

The wizard looked at him and said, "The elephant stands on the back of a giant turtle. And you can stop right there, Majesty. It's turtles all the way down."

My friends, don't get lost in the study of turtles. Endless, vertiginous self-examination leads not only to a sterile moral life, but to a stilted, constricted intellectual life. Yes, examine. But do it with dispatch and modesty and then get on with it: Act and do and go and seek. Save the psychic impact report, the memoirs, and the motives for later. There will be time enough.

Which brings us to lesson three. When you do act and go and seek, what to do? Everything. But above all this: Save the best.

Conserving what's best in the past is, well, conservative advice. It was the advice of Chesterton who defined tradition as the democracy of the dead. Tradition is the ultimate democracy because it extends the franchise to generations past and benefits from their hard-earned wisdom.

Now, in this country, in this city, and at this great university, saving the best means something very particular. It means saving your remarkable and almost unprecedented historical achievement in ethnic coexistence.

North America offers the world two models for ethnic coexistence. The American model is the melting pot, where all are supposed to be turned into Americans upon arrival at Ellis Island. Canada, a different place with a different history, offers a different model. It offers the model of shared sovereignty between two constituent peoples who have learned to live in sometimes fractious but respectful and fruitful proximity.
But what the American and Canadian models share—and what is so often overlooked amid the inevitable imperfections of this blessed continent—is their success. It is no accident that when boat people are found floating on some distant sea their preferred destination is almost invariably North America. Not just because of its prosperity. Not just because of its democracy. But because of its ethnic harmony. We have figured out how to live together without raging ethnic strife.

I find it deeply moving that today in the Bosnian town of Srebrenica, where 20,000 Muslims are surrounded by Serbs, where peoples that have lived in proximity to each other for centuries are now at each other's throats—in Srebrenica, that symbol of ethnic intolerance, there are today 300 Canadian soldiers sheltering the innocent. Soldiers from a country that might have been Yugoslavia serving as protectors in a country that is Yugoslavia.

It has been said that the Balkans produce more history than they can consume locally. That is why multi-ethnic nonlocals—Canadians, French and English—must go there, in the name of coexistence.

I have no particular advice, nor does my country, on your constitutional conundrums, on your paradoxes of language and rights. I merely wish to encourage you to cherish the coexistence—no, not the coexistence, the mutual enhancement—that characterizes this country, that calls its people to serve in places where these lessons are never learned.

This idea of mutual coexistence and enhancement is particularly resonant for you who have just passed through this great university. It is the pride of Canada and of McGill to have harmonized two cultures in such a remarkable and fruitful way.

It is a legacy not to be thrown away. In the United States, there are those who are prepared to throw away the traditional, successful, American approach to ethnic diversity and begin counting by race. It is a dangerous and thoughtless course that we will one day regret with Balkan intensity.

Similarly the Canadian solution of dignified, respectful if sometimes disputatious coexistence between two great peoples is one too precious to be thrown away. Save the best.

Look outward.

Don't lose your head.

End of sermon. Now go out and change the world. My congratulations and best wishes to you all.