Preparing for Peace: Lessons from Lester Pearson

Presented by Martha C. Piper
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The David C. Smith Award was established by the Council of Ontario Universities to honour the memory of the late Dr. Smith and his distinguished contribution to scholarship and policy in higher education. On October 15, 2009, the 2009 David C. Smith Award was presented to Dr. Martha C. Piper, Past President of the University of British Columbia (UBC), for her leadership and advocacy in shaping national strategies that boosted university research and that ultimately attracted international talent and advanced innovation in Canada.
I AM DEEPLY HONOURED to be the recipient of the 2009 David C. Smith Award and want to thank the Council of Ontario Universities for inviting me to deliver this distinguished lecture. When Paul Genest [then President of COU] called several months ago to inform me of this award, I was extremely moved. To be recognized by your peers is truly a humbling experience; to have one’s name associated with David Smith, in our business, is as good as it gets. While I unfortunately never had the privilege of meeting David, I knew him by reputation and his incredible contributions to scholarship and policy in higher education. I also have had the distinct pleasure of getting to know his wife, Mary, who is with us tonight and I want to thank her for attending the lecture this evening. Thank you once again for this honour.

I have selected as my title Preparing for Peace: Lessons from Lester Pearson. Now before you think I have gone mad and mixed up this address with one that might be delivered to a group of international scholars or diplomats, let me reassure you that you are in the right room. I am addressing you – people who are interested in or contributing to postsecondary education – administrators, politicians, corporate CEOs and heads of public sector institutions and NGOs. I am talking about the role of universities in the 21st century.

Perhaps it is because I have come off a splendid week of celebration at the Vancouver Peace Summit with the Dalai Lama and other Nobel Laureates; perhaps it is because one of my biggest disappointments as President of UBC was our inability to convince the public of the importance of enhanced support for the social sciences and humanities; perhaps it is just because I am getting old and recognize that time is running out; or perhaps it is because I am a grandmother. Whatever the reason, I am determined to use every means within my disposal, including this platform, to push an idea, I believe, whose time has come.

Let’s start with Lester Bowles Pearson – a statesman, Nobel Peace Prize winner and former Prime Minister. Lester Pearson – a man of prescient vision, a man who understood, long before the rest of us, how small the world has become. In 1946 – over 60 years ago, and 55 years before the destruction of the World Trade Center – Lester Pearson said this:

“Fear and suspicion engendered in Iran can easily spread to Great Bear Lake above the Arctic Circle in Canada and bedevil economic developments there. There is, now, no refuge in remoteness.”

No refuge then; certainly no refuge today.

Over the past several years, the foundation of what we believe constitutes a civil society has been shaken – providing us with evidence that we indeed are not able to find refuge in our remoteness. Whether it is the terrorist attacks around the world, pending flu epidemics, devastating tsunamis, flagrant violations of human rights, the war in Afghanistan or the threat of nuclear proliferation, it is clear that we are not isolated from world events that occur in far-off regions of the globe – that our remoteness as a northern nation can neither protect nor isolate us from political or environmental threats that are geographically distant.

In the past, we have fallen into the trap of presuming that it is up to the government or international agencies to address these issues – whether it be through humanitarian relief funding, bi-lateral agreements, UN proposals or World Bank initiatives. And yet, our overall track record with this approach is dismal – people around the world continue to go hungry, climate warming is wreaking havoc, and international conflicts are on the rise.

So what do we do? It is clear that there must be another solution. If we are to live in one world – one small, interconnected world – we must all assume and fulfill our responsibilities as citizens of that world. For this is not a war in the conventional political sense. The opponent is
not another country that can be defeated or suppressed militarily. The enemy is ignorance and apathy.

This is, indeed, a fight that a university, every university, must lead. Indeed, universities in the 21st century, Canadian universities in particular, need to rise to the occasion and assume their role in educating the future global citizens, global citizens who will understand the world in which we live, global citizens who will ensure the survival of a civil society - a society in which all individuals, regardless of race, ethnicity, intellectual ability, sexual orientation or religious beliefs, can express themselves without fear, exercise their individual human rights and live in healthy, safe, respectful, and economically strong and trusting communities.

Global citizens. Lest we think we are embarking on something novel, I am reminded of the Greek philosopher Diogenes who, when asked where he came from, replied "I am a citizen of the world." He meant by this that he refused to be defined simply by his local origins and group memberships; he insisted on defining himself in terms of more universal aspirations and concerns. The Stoics who followed his lead developed his image of the kosmopolites, or world citizen, arguing that each of us dwells, in effect, in two communities - the local community of our birth, and the broader community of human argument and aspiration.

It is these two communities coming together within an individual that I believe constitutes global citizenship. In other words, we need not give up our special affiliations and identities, whether national or ethnic or religious; but we do need to work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern, framing local or national politics within a broader structure of respect for all human beings. Our goal, therefore, must be to educate future global citizens who see themselves not simply as citizens of a local region but also as human beings bound to all other human beings by ties of concern and understanding.

And what if we don't succeed in meeting this goal? What if we falter in our educational task? Why should universities move boldly in structuring our curriculums and learning environments to foster global citizenship?

Lester Pearson, in the 1950s, warned that humans were moving into “an age when different civilizations will have to learn to live side by side in peaceful interchange, learning from each other, studying each other's history and ideals and art and culture, mutually enriching each others' lives. The alternative, in this overcrowded little world, is misunderstanding, tension, clash, and catastrophe.”

“Misunderstanding, tension, clash and catastrophe:" While it may have taken us 60 years to heed Pearson's advice, it is increasingly clear that we no longer have the luxury to wait another 60 years to act. The call for “learning” has never before been so compelling. The question now is not “why” – rather “how.”

How do universities educate global citizens? What constitutes the knowledge and scholarship that will assist in defining our role as global citizens?

Thomas Friedman in his best-selling book The Lexus and the Olive Tree makes the compelling case for global understanding through the synthesis of knowledge from a variety of perspectives. He argues that today the traditional boundaries between six disciplines - politics, culture, technology, finance, national security and ecology - are disappearing when it comes to understanding global issues. He suggests that you can neither understand one discipline without referring to the others, nor explain the whole without reference to them all. Friedman equates it to putting on glasses and seeing the world in 6-D or six dimensions.

To be globally literate you have to learn how to synthesize information from each of these disparate perspectives and then weave it all together to produce a picture of the world that
you would never have if you looked at it from
a singular point of view. In my mind it is clear:
In a world where we are all so much more
interconnected, the ability to read the
connections – is the real value provided by an
education. If we don’t teach our students to see
the world through 6-D glasses, we will not teach
them to how to live peacefully in this world.

In the 20th century, university graduates could
get away with thinking that their career would
be as a health professional in a local hospital,
or a financial analyst for a national bank, or an
engineer for a regional technology firm. But
today the scope of practice is the planet Earth,
and the global integration of technology,
finance, trade and information is occurring in a
way that is influencing wages, interest rates,
living standards, culture, job opportunities,
weather, and environmental and health threats
all over the world. Universities must continue to
excel in the individual disciplines and to educate
students to be experts in their chosen field; but
this is no longer enough. They must also expose
students to the complexities of integrating
knowledge across disciplines, and equip them to
think more broadly about their actions in terms
of global issues and concerns. For if we are to
achieve a civil and sustainable society, rather
than “misunderstanding, tension, clash, and
catastrophe,” we must do as Pearson suggested
– “learning from each other, studying each
other’s history and ideals, art and culture,”
in order to live side-by-side in peaceful
interchange.

Peaceful interchange. When accepting the Nobel
Peace Prize in 1957, Lester Pearson challenged
us to seek peace in the world. He complained
that it is a task that we approach badly. He said:
“The grim fact is that we prepare for war like
precocious giants, and for peace like retarded
pygmies.”

I think we have to forgive him the political
incorrectness of the latter phrase – he was a
man of his time, even if ahead of his time – but
I think the point is both accurate and revealing.

We prepare for war with energy and vigour –
even with intelligence – because it is a task
we can easily grasp and understand. War is
what’s left when all the subtlety and complexity
have been stripped away from a disagreement
among humans. War is what happens when we
abandon reason and diplomacy, when logic and
persuasion seem of no more use.

Peace is much harder. Peace tests us. Peace
demands tolerance, understanding and
forgiveness. Peace insists that we embrace
complexity as we embrace the ideals and art
and culture of those whose priorities seem
always a little different from our own.

We have always supported our role of preparing
for war with military colleges, national security
programs, and defense ministers and budgets.
We have been less determined when it comes to
preparing for peace. Why is it that we don’t
have peace departments or peace ministers or
peace budgets to act as counterweights to our
commitment to war?

As Canadians we have an increasing role to
prepare for peace – to move beyond peace-
keeping and lead in peace preparation. And I
believe that this preparation does indeed belong
with and begin in our educational institutions,
with universities showing the way. So what is
the appropriate role for universities in preparing
our students for peace? How do we “teach
peace”?

Well, the short answer is there is not one thing
that must be done; rather there are many things
that can be done. While I do not pretend to
have it all clearly mapped out, I would like to
suggest a four-prong approach: First, our
institutions need to embrace curriculum reform.
Second, we need to increase our support of
the research and scholarship that will help
Canadians prepare for peace. Third, we need
to contemplate a significant role for the federal
government in postsecondary education. And
fourth, each university in its own way must walk
the talk.
1. CURRICULUM REFORM

If we are to succeed in creating a true sense of citizenship in our students, we won't do so by offering an all-purpose, first-year global civics course. We can't assign three credits to consciousness-raising and then get on with the rest of our busy lives. We must embed the messages of citizenship and global responsibility in every course, in every specialty.

Dr. Barry McBride, the previous VP Academic and Provost at UBC, offered a nice example of how that might work – or more specifically, how it has not been working until now.

He said that, as a microbiologist, he had spent his entire teaching career trying to get students excited about things like the bacteriology of salmonella or the mutational capacity of malaria – and these are things that I can tell you Barry finds incredibly exciting.

But in all his classes – in almost four decades of talking about salmonella or E. coli – never once did he draw a connection between what was happening in the Petri dish and the little boy in Guatemala who, for lack of a safe water source, was going to die from diarrhea.

In marvelling at the trickiness of the malarial trypanosome, Barry never once tried to engage a student in the socio-political implications of the mosquito-infested ponds in Peru. He never mentioned that malaria kills more than one million people a year in Africa alone.

That's got to change. If we are to do justice to education, if we are to nurture a generation of Canadians who will help raise the standard of citizenship in their own communities and around the world, we have to start drawing these connections in every class, in every corner of our campus.

Anyone who has read the bestseller Reading Lolita in Tehran by Azar Nafisi can begin to imagine how even with the teaching of Pride and Prejudice or the novels of Henry James one can stimulate students to think globally.

In short, we cannot delegate the task of preparing for peace to one department, or one required course. We must inspire every faculty member in every discipline – to think about the role they can and must play, in their teaching and in their scholarship, in creating a global peace culture.

2. ENHANCED RESEARCH SUPPORT FOR THE SOCIAL SCIENCES AND HUMANITIES

All nations are beginning to recognize the importance of universities to the development and transformation of their economies. Canada is no exception. The development of the Canada Foundation for Innovation, Canada Research Chairs and myriad national research programs such as the Networks of Centres of Excellence and Genome Canada has gone a long way in positioning Canada as an innovative and globally competitive nation. All of these investments and more are required if we are to achieve the prosperity that we all desire in the 21st century. I am not advocating for a pulling back or reallocation of this investment. Rather I am suggesting that an additional investment in the social sciences and humanities is required if we are to contribute significantly to world peace and the resolution of global issues.

We have never as a nation questioned the need to conduct research to cure diseases such as cancer or to understand nuclear fusion or to develop innovative weaponry. Why then can we not accept the notion that we need the same level of scholarly inquiry to help us solve the “diseases” of war and violence; poverty and hunger; hatred and aggression? What kind of research am I talking about? For example do we honestly believe we understand why some children learn to be kind and compassionate while others learn to hate and be aggressive? Studies have consistently shown that children who play violent video games have increased
aggressive behaviour and decreased empathy. Laval University professors Guy Paquette and Jacques de Guise studied six major Canadian television networks between 1993 and 2001 and found incidents of physical violence increased by 378% with an average of 40 violent acts per hour in 2001. It is this type of research that will help us understand the origins of human behaviours that will lead to peace rather than war. Preparing for peace requires the same intensity of research as preparing for war. There is a “method to the madness” and we need to be as disciplined in our approach in unravelling the mystery of human conflict as we have been in splitting the atom.

An increase in funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council will go a long way towards positioning us as a nation that values the research and scholarship underpinning civility, tolerance, human rights, democracy and peace. My model here is health research, where the argument has been advanced that a minimum of 1% of the investment made in health expenditures should be invested into health research. Correspondingly, I would suggest that 1% of all public expenditures on “civil society” programs be invested into research in the human sciences. Consider the amounts invested into social welfare, the corrections system, national defense, foreign aid, heritage and culture, and Indian and Northern Affairs, to name a few broad areas. Why would we not consider investing a minimum of 1% of these expenditures into critical research that would permit us to better understand these expenditures and the programs they support?

3. ROLE OF THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

It is well understood that a sound education is the foundation for a strong and prosperous society. But if universities in the 21st century are to educate global citizens, individuals who are prepared to take Canada’s place in the world, graduates who are active participants in peace preparation, citizens who understand that there is no refuge in our remoteness, then we need to revisit the role of the Canadian government in postsecondary education. I believe the time has come for the federal government to recognize its legitimate role in funding postsecondary education – funding that goes beyond the provincial mandates and jurisdiction; and funding that will address the need to develop and foster curriculums and programs that will result in the education of globally literate Canadians from Newfoundland to Vancouver Island.

I know all the reasons why this idea will be rejected before it is even seriously considered. But without such an initiative, our efforts to prepare for peace, through the education of global citizens, will be sporadic at best and non-existent at worse. This in my mind is what is meant by Canada’s place in the world. It goes far beyond diplomacy or foreign aid. It extends beyond international exchanges or summits. It goes to the sustainability of a world through the education of future generations who indeed will share Lester Pearson’s values and insights.

4. WALKING THE TALK

Finally, I want to come back to us. What can we do every day, individually, as professors, administrators and leaders – as mentors and models for students?

Most importantly our institutions must lead by their actions – creating an environment where students, staff and faculty with diverse ideas and backgrounds can co-exist in harmony; where tolerance and respect are practiced, day in and day out, inside and outside of our lecture halls and laboratories; and where our campuses are places for debate and respectful dialogue rather than venues for intransigent views, adversity and confrontation.

For if our universities are safe and secure, then all of our students will feel welcome; and if students are welcome, they will feel free to pursue their curiosity – the curiosity that
percolates in the soul of every student. By creating tolerant environments, by teaching students to be open to others, by celebrating diversity, by respecting the freedom of the mind in the classroom and in the residence hall – we will produce a generation of scholars who are prepared for peace.

Martha Nussbaum from the University of Chicago notes in her book *Cultivating Humanity* that the true purpose of education is the production of free citizens, citizens who are free not because of wealth or birth, but because they can call their minds their own; citizens who have looked into themselves and developed the ability to separate mere habit and convention from what they can defend by argument; citizens who have ownership of their own thought and speech.

I am increasingly convinced we must all be continually vigilant to demand educational systems that are fitted for freedom. Whether it be our increasing concerns about the threats to free speech, or making our campuses safe for students from various backgrounds and/or different sexual orientations, the need for “free citizens” with free minds has never been greater.

The development of the Standing Committee on Campus Dialogue recently announced by the President of York University – to promote open discussion and debate on timely issues of global significance – is an excellent example of fitting our campuses for freedom. By sponsoring such initiatives we are making it clear that we will not tolerate abusive environments, that there is a better way to learn from each other, and that we are serious about preparing for peace.

In 1967, at age 70, Lester Pearson was looking back on his career, and ahead at what the future held in store for his country. He said: “As we enter our centennial year we are still a young nation, very much in the formative stages. Our national condition is still flexible enough that we can make almost anything we wish of our nation. No other country is in a better position than Canada to go ahead with the evolution of a national purpose devoted to all that is good and noble and excellent in the human spirit.”

I think that Pearson might be pleased today that Canada is still the most admired, the most respected middle power. But if he saw the state of the world, if he witnessed the dangers that we face: the environmental threat of climate change; the political threat of international terrorism; the war in Afghanistan; the health threat of AIDS in Africa; the economic and environmental challenges that await as China and India kick into higher gears as productive and developing countries, I think he would advise that it’s time to revisit our nation’s commitment to learning.

We have the resources: the wealth and the diversity to truly lead the world in preparing the next generation for peace. All we need now is the commitment as a nation, the determination to contribute, and the same conviction as Lester Pearson’s: that Canada and Canadians can indeed make a difference.

Thank you.