Storied lives within storied landscapes

A convocation address by D. Jean Clandinin, University of Alberta

May 2017 Faculty of Education Graduating Class of the

University of Pretoria

Congratulations to the 2017 Faculty of Education graduating class, their families, their professors and their friends on this important day. What an honour to be here with all of you.

We live storied lives within storied landscapes. Thinking narratively about people’s lives is something that I have spent my lifetime doing: working with children, young people, teachers, school principals, physicians, and nurses, thinking about the lives they are composing as they live in homes, schools, hospitals, clinics and other places. Each of you, as graduates of the University of Pretoria, embody stories of your early years and your experiences while studying here at the University.

We are, all of us, living storied lives. We are, all of us, made up of stories. As Thomas King, a Canadian First Nations author writes, “The truth about stories is that’s all we are” (King, 2003). We are the stories that we live out and we are the stories that we tell about our living. We need to pay close attention to the stories we tell about who we are, the stories that others tell about us and the stories that we tell others about who they are and who we are in relation to them. Stories that we tell ourselves, stories we tell others, stories others tell of us. These stories matter deeply to the ways we compose, shape our lives.

“The truth about stories is that’s all we are”. So where do these stories that are us come from? How do they become us? Become all we are.

# Ben Okri, a Nigerian storyteller in his book, *A Way of Being Free*, believes what I do. He writes,

# We live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way. Or we are also living the stories we planted - knowingly or unknowingly - in ourselves. We live stories that either give our lives meaning, or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change or lives. (Okri, 1997, p. 46)

# Okri and I believe that some stories are planted in us early, maybe by our mothers or fathers or teachers or others in our families and communities. Maybe they are stories of who we might become, a teacher, a doctor, a lawyer, a nurse. Maybe they are stories of how we might live, as responsible citizens, as people who have faith in a god or a creator. Other stories are planted in us along the way, by friends, schools, communities. Maybe they are stories of finishing high school, of going to university, of becoming teachers, of marrying, of having children. Sometimes we plant these stories in ourselves without knowing we are planting them, stories that tell us we are kind or generous or hard working or caring or perhaps they are stories that we are not capable, that we are not good enough, not strong enough. As stories are planted in us, by ourselves or by others, early or along the way, we live them out in ways that give our lives meaning or sink us into despair and helplessness.

# As I think about my life growing up on a small subsistence farm in western Canada surrounded by family that loved me, stories were planted in me that I needed to care for the people, animals, and land around me. Stories were planted in me early that I needed to be responsible for my own actions and to also be responsible for, and to, others. A story that I was smart was planted in me, a story that eventually allowed me to know I could go to university, perhaps even earn a degree, the first in my family to do so. These stories were powerful in how they shaped my life. They gave my life meaning, allowed me to shape a life that made sense to me.

# One of the stories being planted in you today is that you are a university graduate from a world-class university, the University of Pretoria. By being awarded this degree today you are being given new stories to live out, new stories that might affirm stories that were planted in you, stories that will continue to shape your life, perhaps in new and unexpected ways. This new story of you as a graduate of the University of Pretoria might allow you to change the stories you live by and, in so doing, change your life.

# Think with me about the ways that this degree you are being given today might change your life, might change the stories you live by within your storied landscapes. The motto of the University of Pretoria is “With zeal and perseverance I strive towards the goal” is sometimes shortened to “Pursuing towards destiny”. And for each of you this new story of you, a graduate of the Faculty of Education University of Pretoria, will be taken up in different ways for we are all unique in how we compose our lives. While the lives you have each composed so far, the stories planted in you that brought you to the University of Pretoria, are unique, the stories you each will continue to compose will be marked in significant ways by a degree from this prestigious university.

# I urge you to consider these new possible stories to live by because you are being awarded this degree today. I ask you to consider how this new story planted in you by the attainment of this degree might allow you to change your life. How will you be changed? How will you change yourself? As you consider those possible changes I ask you to think about who you want to be in these storied landscapes in which we all live. What stories do you want to live by? I want you to consider what stories you are now living in your family. In your communities? In South Africa? In the world?

# As you consider these stories that you are now living and the new stories that may now be possible, I ask you to open yourself up to a view that as Martha Nussbaum (1998) writes “does not privilege already formed communities but one that seeks to defend emerging spaces for new cultural and social configurations reflective of the intermingling of people, ideas, and activities the world over”. In order to open ourselves to defending new spaces, each of us must “become a sensitive and empathetic interpreter’ (p. 63), one who does not nor should not, “suspend criticism toward other individuals and cultures” but becomes what Nussbaum calls a world citizen. “The world citizen may be very critical of unjust actions or policies and of the character of people who promote them … As citizens of this world we must have the ability to see [ourselves] as not simply a citizen of a local region … [but as] inescapably international” (p. 65).

# To be able to see ourselves as living in international landscapes as well as local landscapes, to understand how the stories planted in us and the stories we are planting in others, requires wide awakeness, attentiveness and imagination. Imagination that will allow each of us the possibility to reach past ourselves to what is not yet (Greene, 1995). Imagination to see that we are each working to compose lives that change the stories we each live by and change the storied landscapes in which we each live, that shape forward looking stories for ourselves, and for others with whom we live and work that are more positive, more generative, more life giving.

# As you accept your degree today my hope is that you see possibilities for changing the stories you live by and changing the landscapes in which you, and we, live in ways that will shape a more just and humane world. I wish you success in these future oriented stories and much happiness and joy. Congratulations to each of us.

# References

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