

*Cathy Crowe's remarks on receiving an Honorary Doctor of Laws from York University,
June 17, 2010*

Thank you Chancellor McMurtry, President Shoukri and Dean Skinner.

My congratulations this afternoon to the graduates, and to all of your families, colleagues and friends.

It is an honour for me to receive this doctorate from the Faculty of Health. To the entire faculty, I know that you truly embrace the broadest definition of health. When York honours me with this award, it provides important recognition to other front-line workers and homeless people that housing is a necessity for health and a human right. In fact several weeks ago we filed a Constitutional Charter Challenge to that effect.

In addition, you give them great fun at my expense as they will make the very obvious joke of calling me 'Doctor', not 'Nurse Cathy', every chance they get.

To the nursing faculty, I am thrilled when I receive calls, emails and visits by York University nursing students. When a York student works on a project with me, like Elizabeth Lee, who is here today, I'm ecstatic. As part of her studies Liz worked on **Home Safe**, the documentary film series I produced with filmmaker Laura Sky. It's about homeless families and children and the project was definitely made better as a result of Liz's work.

When you integrate social justice and concepts like poverty, homelessness and hunger into your core curriculum you are leading the way in health and nursing education across the country and we need that leadership – badly.

After we did the seemingly impossible and declared homelessness a national disaster in 1998 I was relieved because I believed the solution, a national housing program, would be forthcoming.

Today, I am dismayed. I can only describe our governments' efforts to deal with mass homelessness as comparable to BP's 'Top Hat' procedure to contain the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. Efforts that focus on concealment, containment, media damage control and disregard for health.

Our governments have made little, if any **effort**, to deal with the deprivation of poverty and its accompanying hunger and homelessness.

It's important to consider the concept of **effort**, because when we choose to put '**effort**' into certain types of issues we do amazing things – including putting an accomplished woman like Julie Payette, another doctorate recipient this week, into space.

Our country's 'leaders' have not put **effort** into dealing with the one in six First Nations communities who do not have safe drinking water or to remedying the situation in Attawapiskat First Nation where ironically their school sits on a site contaminated by over 30,000 gallons of diesel fuel.

They have not put effort into reducing our infant mortality rate – we are now 24th in the world.

They have definitely not put effort into creating safe, affordable housing for the 4 million people in Canada still waiting for a place to truly call home.

I could go on and on.

Given this seemingly impossible state of affairs, I frequently find it necessary to seek inspiration from sometimes unusual sources. One of those sources is film.

I have been inspired by documentary films such as the anti-nuclear film **'If You Love this Planet'**, also the documentary film footage of Martin Luther King's **'I Have a Dream'** speech and more recently the Hollywood film **'Invictus'** - all reminding me of the power of social movements.

Then there is the opening, passionate line from **Oliver!** - **"Please, sir, I want some more."** That line evokes the pain of hunger and in times like this it remains an echo of what I'm seeing and hearing during this recession.

Remember Dorothy's breathless and joyous closing line from the **Wizard of Oz?** **"Toto, we're home! Home! And this is my room - and you're all here! And I'm not gonna leave here ever, ever again because I love you all! - And oh, Auntie Em, there's no place like home."**

There are so many films about home, losing home, missing home, finding home again. Like ET, WALL-E, Peter Pan, Gone With The Wind, The Road.

In our documentary film **Home Safe Toronto** a young girl, who had been homeless, tells us that the most important thing about home is: **"Being able to say you have one."**

Also there is the moment when a young boy passionately tells the United Nations Rapporteur, who was investigating Canada's conditions: **"When you have a home, it's exactly like a protection, sort of like a force field from stuff that are dangerous. So, sometimes, when you are homeless....if you know that you're getting a decent home and you're going there soon you kind of get overwhelmed with happiness and that's what a lot of people want now."**

As the late Art Linkletter used to say **"Kids say the darndest things!"**

I recently watched *'The Man in the Iron Mask'*, about the Three Musketeers. Their famous line *'One for All. All for One'* strikes me as an appropriate message for today as we fight to save social programs like Medicare. We need to be looking out for each other with that sentiment - *'Health care for all, not just for those who can pay.'*

But it is director Tim Burton's film *'Alice in Wonderland'* that gives me a new approach to the seemingly impossible. Alice, now a teenager, finds herself down the dark rabbit hole and after a series of adventures she faces the dragon-like creature Jabberwocky which she is expected to slay.

Alice looks up at it and pronounces: *"This is impossible."*

The Mad Hatter, (played by Johnny Depp) whispers: *"Only if you believe it is."*

Alice decides to reveal to the Mad Hatter: *"Sometimes I believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast."*

The Mad Hatter turns to her and says *"That's an excellent practice, but just for the moment you might want to focus on the Jabberwocky."*

I don't think it's a spoiler alert to say it is inevitable that Alice slays the beast.

So, after 22 years now as a Street Nurse, I have decided I need to wake up every morning like Alice. I need to believe as many as six impossible things before breakfast and stay focused on the Jabberwocky, the beast that we face, because I firmly believe it is inevitable that we will take the beast down and win a national housing program. And I hope a lot more.

Effort produces results.

You know that, your great **effort** is why you are all here today.

I hope you will continue to be inspired to make great **efforts** in life, achieve many of your dreams and also believe **six impossible things before breakfast**.

Thank you all for allowing me to share this day with you! You inspire me!

Check with delivery