

Address to Graduates of Catholic Religious Educational Development Institute (CREDI)

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By

Dr. Hollis "Chalkdust" Liverpool

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***Education! Education! That is the foundation.  
Our rising population needs sound education.***

***To be recognized anywhere you go,***

***Have your certificate to show.***

***To enjoy any kind of happiness***

***Knowledge is the key to success.***

***Children go to school and learn well***

***Otherwise later on in life, you go ketch real hell.***

***Without an education in your head***

***Your whole life go be pure misery; you better off dead.***

***For there is simply no room in this whole wide world,***

***For an uneducated little boy or girl.***

***Don't allow idle companions to lead you astray***

***To earn tomorrow, you gotta learn today.***

**Chair, Staff, Distinguished Guests, Media .... Graduands:**

Thank you very much for inviting me to speak to the graduates of year 2015; it is indeed a privilege. When I received the invitation, I said to myself that the Principal must certainly be an outsider, for Trinidadians usually invite me to sing while foreigners invite me to talk. You could imagine how surprised I was to find out that your Principal and I were once teachers at Mucurapo Secondary school.

At graduation ceremonies, many speakers choose lots of themes with lots of messages about what is to be expected of good teachers. They stress a lot of economics, theories and principles of the social sciences etc. Most of what they say is often forgotten in a few days. Accordingly, I will simply focus on two points hoping that you all will remember them. You see I was once in Antigua and a woman came up to calypsonian King Obstinate and began to elaborate all her woes to him. After listening for about ten minutes he told her, "Madam I will never remember all dem things you want. Just tell me how much money you want." She asked for a loan of \$500. Obstinate went into his drawer and gave her \$499.79. She was furious. "Ah want \$500.00 borrow." Obstinate insisted. ***"If I give you \$500, you will forget to repay me, but you will remember \$499.79."*** We usually remember poignant things better.

I have therefore selected as my theme, **“School teachers: the transfer point of Civilization and Cultural Literacy.”** I hope you will remember them.

Over the past two years, you have been soaking up , I am sure, all the theories of learning, all the principles of behaviour, all the written methods of teaching, all the Philosophers and their philosophies, all the Rousseaus, Pestalozzi and Kants, all the intellectual values pertaining to English, Maths, the Social Sciences and, I hope, History. Give yourselves a round of applause for graduating after learning all those theories about education etc. But for what purpose did you learn all that work, may I ask? The answer is simple; it is to get an education. But for what purpose, again I ask? Well, ever since the world began, men have been asking that question: what is the purpose of having an education? Some say **it is to be fit to live and fit to live with.** In Athens and in Sparta (Greeks), citizenship was the goal of education. In ancient China, it was to pass the public service exam and become a public servant. H.G Wells, the English philosopher says “it is to lift the mind out of blind alleys.” Others say it is to make money to live a life of comfort and Sparrow says **“it is to prevent you from ketching hell.”** Although all societies at different times have different ideas about education, they all agree that education differs from society to society and its purpose is to produce educated people. Then we must ask ourselves, how do I know an educated man or woman? I say to you this evening that the educated man or woman travels with a different view in that he strives to transfer civilization and cultural literacy to the youth of his community.

First, let us talk about Civilization. The history of this world, if narrowed to a paragraph, would reveal one of wars, one of murders and thefts, of fights among families and tribesmen, of brutality and slaughter, of butchery, of squander mania, of covetousness, of ill will and deceit, of famine and hunger, of waste and corruption, of the manufacture of guns and bombs, of the abuse of women and children, of the rape of villages, of aborting babies, of the sale of children for slavery and sexual purposes, of discrimination and prejudice, and the Catholic church would add, of the breaking of the ten commandments. Some may say that some wars have brought peace; nevertheless, war in itself is a barbarous act. All such features that I have mentioned are tantamount to barbarous, uncivilized life. That is why after the fall of the Roman Empire, men outside of the Roman Empire were described as barbarians and the age was **termed “the Age of the Barbarians.”** If you were not a Roman, then you were a Barbarian.

History also shows that when men began to plant crops, to exchange goods, to communicate with neighbours, to do research, to document, to punish wrongdoers, to find medicines for prolonging life, the age was called one of Civilization. Furthermore, civilization was marked and is today still marked by having sex within decent family life, by marriage blessed by the creator, by raising children in the love, justice and fear of God, and by carrying out, as Christ says, the adage: **“love thy neighbour as thyself.”** All such features are tantamount to civilization and I daresay that man has been aspiring to spread it ever since the world began. You will, I am sure, note that the ancient Greeks, Romans, Egyptians and Sumerians have all laid claim to the theory that it was in their society and time that civilization began. Those of us who are Catholics know

that when Jesus Christ instituted Catholicism, calling on us, following the Last Supper, to sanctify the children in Christ, calling on us to forgive our fellow man, what he was in fact doing was spreading the message of civilization. Indeed, the Preface of last week's Mass as we celebrated the Feast of Christ the King, called for **"a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace."** And I note that Pope Francis is calling for a culture of peace in Africa as we speak.

That desire to spread civilization, my dear graduates, is the work of teachers, especially Catholic teachers. Spreading civilization among men and women is your goal. And, with all due respect to priests, with all due respect to parents and with all due respect to politicians, know that you are one of, if not the most important person in society, when it comes to the spread of civilization. I once went to a High Mass at the Cathedral and could find no room so I sat up in the pews next to the altar. A priest remonstrated my action saying: "Get out, get out. Here is reserved for priests." I called him nearer and said in his ear, "Father, I am a Catholic teacher." He got the message. **May I remind you that Jesus Christ was a Catholic teacher, before he was a priest?**

Look around today, in what we call the civilized world and see so many elements of uncivilized life. We see ISIS butchering men in Syria for their beliefs; we also see the U.S., Russia, France, Britain and Israel raining bombs on people simply because they have a different way of life. We see men and women in Iraq and Iran blowing themselves up hoping to see Jesus before their time; we see people killing innocents in Mali, Turkey, and France, to name a few; we see students becoming raging terrorists on campuses throughout the U.S.; and we just saw barbarous men blowing up a Russian plane over the Sinai desert. All such are examples of uncivilized life. Here in the Caribbean a few years ago, nearing Barbados, a plane was blown up by two Venezuelans. In Trinidad right on Frederick Street in 2005, a woman's body was ripped apart by a bomb and two weeks ago, a child was butchered on her bed in Diego Martin by a gunman. We see in Trinidad children not going to school for all sorts of reasons; we see babies being raped and strangled; we see road hogs killing people and state boards riddled with nepotism and corruption. We see school children fighting among themselves publicly, bullying one another and smoking many an illegal stuff. We see too, people digging their graves with their teeth, hurling abuses on one another and castigating others all because they belong to a different race or ethnic group. All such behaviour adds up to uncivilized life.

Educated people, like you graduands, must use your gifts to bring civilization to the uncivilized. And, you don't have to go to Syria to see uncivilized life. In our schools, when we refuse to teach so called "backward" children; when we refuse to correct the faults of students; when we don't pass on to children social values such as good health, love, peace, justice, courtesy to others, the corporal and spiritual works of mercy; when we don't teach them the magnificence of the creator, then we become exemplars of non-civilization. I see examples of non-civilization in the school toilets where children write nastiness on the walls; I see it in the classroom where many destroy school property and where they use profanities and bully others.

As teachers, you may not civilize the world but your responsibility is to at least civilize this part of our world. Whenever I get a bad drive, whenever I hear young men cursing, whenever I see youth wearing their underclothes above their clothes, participating in illicit sexual behaviour, dressing immodestly, refusing to obey the laws of the land or constituted authority, I don't know what you do but I ask myself: Who teach he? Who teach them? I know some of you will say what about their parents? My answer to that is: **parents have a duty to socialize their children; besides and beyond socialization, teachers have a duty to civilize the uncivilized, some of whom may be parents.** We change the thinking process of all with whom we come into contact; we exploit their humanity; we change their world; we are the transfer point of civilization. We give them a sense of identity; we change them from being Greeks, Romans, Englishmen, Americans; we turn them into Trinidadians. We fashion and fill them with an ideology: feminism; capitalism; socialism; structuralism. Hopefully let it be Trinidadianism. We turn them on to Trinidadianism, the culture fashioned here by enslavement, indenture, migration and colonialism; we make them culturally literate. And when we strengthen their Triniadianism, we allow them to see and judge and even use some of the worthwhile things in other civilizations. As my father use to say: Bury your dead before looking at others.

All educators agree that education differs from place to place. An educated man from Borneo needs different skills to that of one from England. If Einstein was born in Toco, Trinidad, to survive, he would have had to learn to catch crabs. Education, my dear graduands, involves knowledge of the cultural context, an understanding of the principles, the form of thought and the mastery of things that make up the culture. You can have all the intellectual skills, all the knowledge of this world and you are culturally illiterate, then you are not educated. I have met dentists, engineers, computer specialists who know nothing of Sparrow or of Leroi Clarke and I tell them they are not educated. To be educated is to be bathed in the refinements of your culture. You must be culturally literate in terms of understanding carnival, calypso, chutney, parang, the Pierrot Grenade, the mas camp, our roti, our idioms, our sayings, our idiosyncrasies, our heritage, our accent. To be educated is to know of Eric Williams, Albert Gomes, Sister Rosario, Reginald Griffith (The Trini who invented the cure for red ring disease in the coconut palm) Lennox Pawan (the Trini who taught the world that rabies came from bats), Black Stalin, David Rudder and that crazy fellow named Crazy. So if you know not of these things, you have to get to them NOW and then pass them on to your charges so as to redefine their sense of self, their sense of identity and patriotism.

Cultural literacy means that you must not only know all these attributes of Trinidadians; you must be able to talk about them, communicate with others on them and pass them on to your charges. If you the teachers are not culturally literate, then the children cannot be. We are different culturally and we teachers must make the difference in our children's lives. If I had time, I would go into the number of things that Trinis gave the world besides steelband, calypso, mas and doubles. **How many of you know, for example, that it is a Trini who started the Reggae. How many of you know that Michael Jackson learnt his moon walk from watching Trinis when he came here in the 80s? How many of you know that Lord Kitchener's calypso became the rallying anthem of Ghana's independence? How many of you know that**

**Trinis are responsible for over 100 carnivals the world over? How many know that the world now says that the pan is the best instrument for teaching children music? How many of you know that it was Trinidadians, Gil Figaro and yours truly who, twenty seven years ago founded the notable SUNSHINE Awards for Caribbean achievements, especially in the field of music?**

Last election, the PNM used the calypso "**Ba Bye Kamla**" to rally on their followers. These things do not happen in Australia or India or in London. It is a Trini thing. Everybody including the opposition was singing the calypso and that helped the PNM to win. The Englishman would not even understand what is meant by "Ba Bye Kamla." The Englishman would say: Mrs Bissessar, now that you have completed your term of office, we think it is only fitting that you should demit office and pass on the reins of government to another party in the interest of all concerned. We simply say: Ba Bye kamla, Ba Bye. The Englishman says: I am suffering from pecuniary strangulation; the American says: I am broke; The Australian says: I am incapacitated by my pocket; **the Trini says: Pressure.**

To be culturally literate is to understand why Trinis wave their hands at a fete. Why in the first place they fete in a manner different from everyone. Why do they play music without reading score sheets? Why do they wave toilet paper at a calypso show? (A Vincentian calypsonian asked me why do we wave toilet paper?). To be culturally literate is to understand why Trinis spend millions to celebrate Carnival. It is to understand the anthropology of Sparrow. It is to understand the music of Kitchener. (What school Kitchener went to?) It is to understand why they wear Black for funerals and cry without knowing who is in the coffin. It is to understand the mind of Peter Minshall and George Bailey. It is to understand why they parang the wrong house. It is to understand why we spend hours in a panyard. It is to understand why most panyards had a breadfruit tree. It is to understand how, where and why Brian Lara learnt to play cricket. Education is that tool that makes us culturally literate and distinguishes us from others by giving us an identity.

Way back in 1968 I had cause to sing.

*The young people colour crazy  
In fathead and dashiki.  
They want to know more of India;  
Some want to go back Africa.  
But I want them to start thinking  
And stop this dam race searching.  
For though we are of black pigment,  
Yet culturally, we are different.  
(Because) They have no roti over in India  
They don't know bout kurhi and kuchela  
They do not sell oysters by their croisee  
Or dance our kind of Hosein.  
And Africans cannot beat steelband  
Most of them never see a pan.  
Man only you the Trinidadian  
Know about Obeah man.  
So that is right here you will find your identity.*

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*I'm not condemning Africa
Our ancestral roots lie there
But regardless of your colour
The world know you by your culture.
So all you Syrians and Chinese
Whites, Asians and Portuguese
Shake off dem foreign ties you had
And put on the armour of Trinidad. (because)*

*They don't hold carnival in Calcutta.
You cannot dance Bongo up in Syria.
They don't fete up and drink rum in China
Like dem Chinese doing over here.
And when you go way from this country
Once they know you are a Trini,
They will say: sing a kaiso for me,
Beat a pan make some pelau or roti.
So that is right here you will find your identity.*

And to this theme Mighty Power chipped in: ***you think dem could go to Cuba and say we have sugar? You mad! Oh mi Lard! Cuba have more sugar than Trinidad.***

The ball is in your court teachers. Although you have been trained in intellectual values, your learning is not complete until you become culturally literate in things and areas Trinidadian. All of you are literate but now you have to be culturally literate so that you can understand the Trinidad child and you can fashion him or her in a manner that will allow him or her to be bathed with the refinements of the Trinidadian personality. It is not only the Europeans have civilization! Civilization is not for Romans only. When you bathe the Trinidad child with the refinements of his language, his artefacts, his heritage, his way of doing things, his proverbs, his local heroes and his music, you are laying the foundation for or the continuation of his Trinidadian civilization.

As trained teachers, your role is to make our country a land such as the one described by the Bengali poet, Rabindranath Tagore when he said he wanted to be educated and live in a land “where the mind is free, and the head is held high. Where knowledge is free; where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow domestic walls. Into that heaven of freedom, my father let my country awake.” As trained, degreed teachers, your role is to produce more Tagores, more educated people. According to Tagore, an educated person enjoys freedom so that he can develop his personality and a free will nurtured to worship his creator, by understanding the difference between civilized and uncivilized behaviour. In this global world, he’ll be able to see the difference between his Trinidadian traits and those of other civilizations.

And as trained teachers, go boldly into the classroom with confidence and God at your side. As an example of cultural literacy, go into the classroom like Tubal Uriah Butler did in the 1930s. Butler used to begin his political meetings with “God and Uriah Butler.” How could you beat that combination! ***Go into the classroom giving thanks that you are teachers.*** Go into the classroom knowing that you are trained, degreed trained teachers, and if you are a Catholic teacher, give further thanks. Give God thanks for the solution in advance and then picture yourself filled with a surge of confidence and energy that releases all doubts and fears. In calypso we call that unshakeable confidence the gam. It is a confidence that turns all dreams into realities.

So, I began by asking you who is an educated person. I conclude by saying that an educated person is one who travels with a different view. His or her aim is to change the world, like Martin Carter that illustrious, Guyanese poet said. “I dream to change the world.” The educated man or woman aims to change the world by bringing to his charges civilization and cultural literacy.

Let me close by giving you a true story. When I was an officer in the Catholic Teachers Assn., we invited the Secretary of the Catholic Board of Education to give the address at our Annual Convention. His name was Fr. Nicholas Greene. I will never forget his speech because it didn't deal with things we will forget. Rather, it dealt with one thing that I will always remember. His speech went like this: Mr Chairman, Your Grace! Normally, I have one speech but today I have three speeches for you teachers. Speech No.1: Go and teach the children. No.2: Go and teach the people's children. Speech No.3: Go and teach and teach the people's children. Thank you. I too, like Fr. Greene, have three speeches for you. 1.: **Socialize the people's children**; No 2. **Civilize the people's children**. No.3: **Literalize culturally, the people's children**.

Children go to school and learn well ...

I thank you.

Dr. Hollis "Chalkdust" Liverpool

Calyptonian, Teacher, Historian, Researcher, Professor