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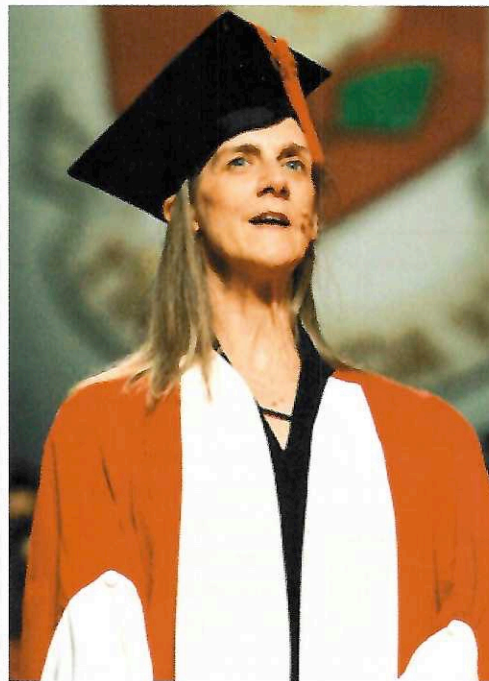
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## Convocation honouree Peggy Baker speaks on work as creation and making meaning through the arts

June 13, 2013

One of Canada's pre-eminent artists stepped to the York University Convocation stage June 10 to receive an honorary doctor of letters degree. Internationally renowned dancer, choreographer, educator and arts advocate Peggy Baker was recognized for her work to raise the profile of dance across the nation, expand artistic expectations and deepen dance education. Her creative work and teaching have inspired several generations of performers in both modern dance and ballet.



Peggy Baker

Baker addressed graduands of the Faculties of Fine Arts and Liberal Arts and Professional Studies at the Convocation ceremony. "I am awed to be in the company of so many accomplished and inspiring individuals and I am deeply moved to be the recipient of an honorary doctorate," she said. "This award is a bold declaration by York University of the vibrancy, relevance and value of the Canadian dance milieu - a community that I am privileged to be a part of."

Baker spoke with passion about growing up in Edmonton, one of six children born to parents who were inspired teachers. With their encouragement, she spent her early years exploring the wonder of the arts, the discipline of language and a love of performing, building a foundation that allowed her to discover her own gift.

A watershed moment came when, as a high school student, she won a bursary that allowed her to attend a summer theatre school. "One of our daily classes, called movement for actors, was actually an introduction to the serious and demanding dance technique of Martha Graham. The teacher was Patricia Beatty, a professional modern dancer recently returned to Canada from New York City and the founding artistic director of Toronto Dance Theatre," said Baker. "She spoke like a poet, describing how we were to move and guiding our bodies with her hands. Her dancing was fierce, feline, with actions emanating from the torso. She moved with weight and fluidity, utterly connected to her body and to the moment.

"The image she presented went beyond all possibilities for female expression that I had ever encountered. Her lessons opened outward to encompass all and everything that moved and excited

me. Set in motion according to her instructions, I had the extraordinary sensation of having discovered my essential nature. I felt both transformed and yet perfectly myself," said Baker.

Within a few years, Baker had become a student at the New York dance school of Martha Graham. Baker recounted how one day, in the middle of a class, Graham stopped and challenged her students to own their art, demanding: 'Do you want to be dancers?' "Some of the students around me averted their gaze but I looked directly at her; the room seemed to vibrate," said Baker. "'Declare yourself to be a dancer now!' she commanded. 'Say: 'I am a dancer!' - and then show me!'" This, and two other encounters with giants in the world of dance, were moments of reckoning for Baker.

In her late 20s, she discovered the groundbreaking work of celebrated New York-based choreographer Lar Lubovitch and studied with him for two summers. It was an experience that she said left her with "a kind of heart sickness", because she felt she would never be good enough to join his company. When he phoned her out of the blue, inviting her to audition, Baker told him that she couldn't make it. She received another invitation, this time not for an audition; instead the iconic choreographer invited Baker to spend an afternoon working with him to be sure she was right for his ensemble. Again, she lacked the courage to accept. "Unbelievably", Baker said, Lubovitch called a third time and told her: "You need to do this. We need to work together." She went, and ended up touring the world with Lubovitch's company. "I became, through his generous encouragement and demanding mentorship, the dancer he had imagined," Baker said.

The next pivotal encounter came during a year she spent working with Mikhail Baryshnikov and his White Oaks Dance Project. One day in rehearsal, while struggling to execute a difficult turn, Baker expressed her frustration, saying it was hard for a modern dancer. "A 'modern' dancer? Peggy, there are two kinds of dancers: good ones and bad ones," Baryshnikov responded.

"Whether through dance, psychology, film making, mathematics, music -- what each of us hopes to discover is a pursuit so aligned with our nature that it draws us fully into a matrix of interconnectivity, meaning and purpose," Baker said.

She spoke of a letter to the editor her father had sent her, in which a young architect spoke about music education being critical to his success as an architect, because learning to play an instrument as an extracurricular activity had taught him what could be achieved through commitment and hard work. The architect had written the letter in response to proposed budget cuts that would eliminate music and art education in the public school system. "He identified his serious and joyful studies in music as crucial to his ambition to excel and contribute through work he loves," said Baker. "He discovered that something could be unquantifiable yet immeasurably valuable."

"You lucky graduates of these two Faculties with the word 'art' in the descriptor," she said to the convocating students. "Your connection to creativity and the potency of culture can nourish every aspect of your life if you take it to heart. If you consider work and creation to be one and the same, you will engage with imagination, daring and integrity in everything you do."

Baker also spoke of the larger societal value of these creative qualities. "We share the knowledge that making and experiencing art feeds the soul; that culture is a perpetual work in progress integral to the fabric of society; that culture is wealth that we share," she said.

Baker became one of the founding members of Toronto's famed Dancemakers company in 1974. In 1980 she joined the Lar Lubovitch Dance Company, where she was a featured performer for eight years. She became the first ever artist-in-residence at Canada's National Ballet School in 1990, and a decade later she launched the Choreographers' Trust, through which she has passed on her solo works. For more than 20 years, she has shared her art, experience and inspiration teaching master classes through Peggy Baker Dance Projects. She has been named a member of the Order of Canada and the Order of Ontario in recognition of her generous contributions and unflagging devotion to her art.

View an archived webcast of Baker's convocation address on York University's [Convocation June 2013 website](#).

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