Chancellor Anne Giardini, Q.C.
Convocation Address Fall 2015

If you go to Cambridge, England, which I hope you will have a chance to do, outside Corpus Christi College, you can visit a piece of street art called a “chronophage”, which means “time eater”. It takes the form of a grasshopper-like insect that moves its large jaws, and seems to "eat up" the seconds as they pass.

Below the clock is an appropriately cautionary inscription taken from 1 John 2, verse 17: “The world and its desires pass away”.

The point of it is to remind us of the inevitable passing of time.

There are many reminders of time and its passing. Didn’t your time here – except for the exams maybe – fly by? And where did your childhood go? Don’t old people, you know, folks in their 40s, always tell you they don’t know where the days go and that the years go faster and faster?

When my mother was in your chair – except in her case, the chair was in Indiana and the year was 1957 – when she was about to graduate from Hanover College, the graduating class was told by their speaker, a beloved math professor, this: Tempus Fugit. Time flies.

As my mother remembered it years later, the math professor told them that, unless the graduands before him seized the moment – in fact seized every moment – their lives would get away from them. Their days and years would be eroded, erased, wasted. Thrown away through carelessness ... lost.

As a result, in the years that immediately followed, my mother said, she worried. “Time was hurrying by. Brushing past me. I could almost hear the flapping of the winged chariot. My little life was left behind in the dust. I was standing still or so I thought. The words “Tempus Fugit!” whenever I paused to recollect my graduation day spooked me, scared me. I was persuaded that I had failed, because I was not filling everyday with accomplishment. I was not pushing forward and making the most of my allotted time on earth.”

But then she learned something important. Something I have learned too and that I would like to pass on.

The art of finding time to achieve something meaningful, is this – find any time that you might happen to be able to muster, and structure your task so that it fits into that time in a way that allow you to get done what you want to achieve. There may not be a perfect time, and there may not be much of it as you’d like, but if we can find some bits of it, and organize it in some way that makes sense, then we may be able to turn those scraps and moments into something enduring. The days cannot be stretched, but they can be shaped.

In part from my mother’s experience, in part from my own, and in part from reading, and from observing other busy and successful people, particularly creative people, I have seen over and over that the
nature of time requires that we consciously shape our goals and that we take up the things that are most important to us, our friends, our work, our families, our art, and fold them like origami into the time we have in life, or alternatively, shape the time we have to those important tasks.

It helps if we start by reframing to change our perspective of work as overwhelming, and time as severely limited.

If we come from mindset of scarcity, life will feel scant. When we come from a perspective of plenty, we experience life as abundant. Time is like this too. We should treat it as precious and profuse, not precious and inadequate. The reframing has to do with changing challenges – such as where to find time – into advantages – such as how will I make the best use of the time that is demonstrably available to me?

Each hour, each second, each day, week, month and year of our existence is, after all, a miracle. And each, as that math professor said, is to be seized. But they are not in fact fleeting or sparse, not if we treat them as expansive and abundant and as generously given to us to spend as we choose. I’ll quote my mother’s conclusion because she said it better than I could ever do.

Tempus does not fugit.

She had discovered this.

Time is not cruel. Given the good luck of a long healthy life, as most of us have, we have plenty. Plenty of time. We have time to try our new selves. Time to experiment. Time to dream and drift. Time even to waste. Fallow time. Shallow time.

We'll have good years and bad years. And we can afford both. Every hour will not be filled with meaning and accomplishment as the world measures such things but there will be compensating hours so rich, so full, so humanly satisfying that we will become partners with time and not victims of it.

Most of us end up seeing our lives not as an ascending line of achievement but as a series of highly interesting chapters.

We might not have the good luck of a long healthy life. Our own beloved Terry Fox, whose statue is in the Academic Quadrangle gardens, didn’t quite make it to age 23, for example. But there was someone who shaped his days to his goals and his goals to his days. He ran 5,373 kilometres in 143 days and he said that if he couldn’t finish, then others would do it for him.

My hope for you is that you don’t worry about time running out but about how to put your time to good use. Wonderful use. Imaginative, constructive, engaging use.

I for one, can’t wait to see what you do with the time ahead.

Thank you. And congratulations to you all.