

**Fall 2019 Welcome Ceremony
President's Remarks
Dr. Victoria J Mora
UWC-USA**

Tonight we feel the joy that comes with a commitment to diversity and intercultural understanding. We share the belief that there can be no peace or long term sustainability without this commitment. In our joy and belief, it's easy to forget the challenges facing many of the countries represented by these colorful flags. So many are experiencing a rise in the kind of isolationist thinking we may have thought to be a thing of the past. This was on full display in the last few weeks during the G7 summit in France, where the leaders of Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and the United States could not come up with the joint communique that traditionally establishes points of agreed commitment. The impact of isolationist thinking isn't just political. It's personal to all of us. This was on full display in the tension between Brazil's nation-centric response to the fires in the Amazon and the world outcry to protect "the lungs of the planet." And of course the great migration of human beings displaced by climate change, conflict and



violence, isn't being played out only on the border of this country with Mexico, but on many borders where immigrants are being turned away in the name of national interests and national identity.

By calling up these examples, I don't mean to pick on any one country or set of countries. I also don't believe for one minute that all forms of nationalism are bad. Witness the pride expressed by our second years carrying their national flags. But the trends shown in the examples I have chosen are real. Many governments have decided it's time to return to putting country first, even at the expense of the planet and its people.

As citizens of our countries, we aren't doing so well either. Not only are we living in a highly polarized environment, we're likely contributing to it. We are polarized by our politics, our positions in the so-called culture wars, and where we fall on the ever-widening economic divide. We are more likely to talk only to those who agree with us, or who share our social and economic circumstances, than we are to reach across our differences toward mutual understanding and respect. We hold tight to ideological beliefs, and we are complacent about the disconnect between our thoughts and our actions. We say things to one another on social media we would never say face to face. We vilify those who disagree with us, or who don't understand us right away.

Please forgive me for sharing these unpleasant, even unwelcome, facts on an evening meant for celebration. I do so only because I believe that things could be otherwise. WE could be otherwise. And we all have the power to make this happen. This power starts with something we all possess. It's something we have regardless of where we come from, how much money we have, or who we know. It's something we have regardless of how high or low our test scores are, how many and which passports we carry, who we love, or whether we are believers. It's something we have regardless of our place within a family, or an organization, or the community of nations. This power we all have brings with it endless possibilities for hope or despair, creation or destruction.

The power I'm talking about is our power of attention, and where we place it. We're living in an age when our great power, our attention, is under threat. There's a constant deluge of information and entertainment popping up on the screens we've forgotten how to live without. We're pulled in countless directions by seemingly endless challenges that present no easy answers. It's difficult to know where to focus. Yet each one of us has the power to choose where we put our attention. Now more than ever, it's important to remember this. And so I ask: What are we paying attention to? What am I paying attention to? What are you paying attention to? And how might our struggling

countries, our planet and its people, be better or worse based on where we put our attention?

Let me give three examples of the positive impact that attention can make:

A young woman enjoys a community event, but notices the amount of waste produced with paper and plastic products used for the event. In other words, she pays attention not only to the celebration, but to the waste produced there. What does she do with her attention? She focuses it on a solution. She makes a call to action to all of the attendees in the following year, asking them to bring their own dishes to the event. A large number of those who receive her call pay attention to it. They bring their dishes. And guess what? A fraction of the waste is produced at the community event. The young woman's attention has been turned into action, and that action has made a difference in the life of a community.

Or consider several young men who notice a disconnect between what a community says about celebrating difference and how it actually behaves. They pay attention to that disconnect and realize that, in too many cases, only those who agree with the majority feel free to speak up, to share opinions. The young men turn their attention to a solution, and most importantly, to their own power to bring that solution forward. They decide to host a series of conversations that encourage respectful debate on controversial issues. The young

men's attention has been turned into action, and that action has made a difference in the life of a community.

Several young people realize that they have fallen into the trap of "us and them" thinking with the faculty and administration of their school. They pay attention to that trap, including their place in perpetuating it. They decide that one way out of it is to reach out to those on the other side of the "us and them" dynamic they have noticed. They offer observations from their point of view, calling attention to things that matter to them. And they go beyond that. They pay attention to potential solutions that will require partnership. Those on the receiving end pay attention, too. They could focus only on what they agree with, or refuse to pay any attention at all. Instead they focus on the difference in perspective and what it teaches them. They agree to partnership. Everyone's attention has been turned into action, and that action has made a difference in the life of a community.

Now for those who are citizens of this microcosm of the world that we call UWC-USA, you've probably recognized that the individuals I'm talking about are part of this very community. I didn't mention their names, and that was intentional. The point isn't who I'm talking about, but where they have focused their attention--and ours. And of course, I didn't have to focus on the young people in our community. So many of our employees

and volunteers step up every day because they're paying attention and putting that attention into action.

My point in choosing these examples was only to show the power of attention. The power of noticing something and then doing something about it. This is the only way that change happens, though change can take many legitimate forms. It's also the only way that important traditions are carried forward, like tonight's Welcome Ceremony and parade of flags. Our attention can set in motion actions that disrupt or that preserve. Actions that make our communities and environment more or less sustainable and resilient. Actions that make space for others or exclude them. Actions that hold ourselves and our leaders to account or that mimic the polarization that prevents us from working together in service of a better future. The point is that attention is a power each of us possesses, and how we use it can make a difference in our own lives and in the lives of our communities.

My wish for all of us here tonight is that we learn to take seriously, and to value, our power of attention. That we take seriously, and value, the precious resource that it is in a world filled with distractions that isolate us from one another and prevent us from discovering our common interests and commitments. If we can fully embrace our power of attention, place it at the center of our personal responsibility and engagement with one another and our various environments, we can be the

difference we want to see in our countries, on our planet, and in solidarity with all people--maybe especially those who are different from us and who wave the colors of a different flag.