

Convocation Speech
to University of Guelph, Humber Campus, Business Students

June 20, 2016

Good Day Provost Yates, President Whitaker, Vice-Provost Walsh, Platform guests, Faculty, Students, Parents, and Friends.

It was a lovely surprise and it is a great honour and pleasure to have been invited back by the University of Guelph – Humber to deliver a second Convocation address. At the convocation in 2013 where I was also incredibly honoured to receive a Doctorate of Laws Honoris Causa, I chose to reflect on the lessons in life that I had learned from my children, and how they could be applied by everyone in helping to build an inclusive society for people with disabilities. I wanted to impart to parents, faculty and students, the idea that not only are our children special because they are inquisitive, imaginative, incorrigible, delightful, disconcerting, challenging, sometimes hilarious, sometimes frightening, and most importantly, unique and wonderful people, but they may teach us, the adults in their lives, in mysterious ways. Our kids show us ourselves sometimes, they show us the world up close because they don't see the far and wide, and in

interpreting or even magnifying their perspective, we, the parents, can get a whole new perspective on life.

Today, I want to share with you, some reflections I have had about the various people who have influenced my life (other than my three 20 something children); and my purpose in doing so, is to encourage each and every one of you, the graduating class of 2016, to think about life lessons you've learned from those you love, from people you remember who may have come into your lives, sometimes only briefly, or who have remained important to you until now. Think of people who have impacted you, in your attitudes, beliefs, choices, relationships, goals, or preferences in any way, and how they may have influenced you. Think about how you would honour them, if what they shared remains important to you, if it has influenced you, and how you intend to use the life lesson that they imparted to you. Take a moment and think about one individual who has meant a lot to you, and why that is so.

Sometimes we have a long, enduring relationship with people, such as with parents or grandparents, friends made in kindergarten or same age cousins, people with whom you may have enjoyed many personal experiences. Here is the challenge. Do you recall some special or positive message that you gained from

that special person? Sometimes, we have but a fleeting or short-lived contact with an individual, perhaps a colleague, a summer romance, a university roommate or class mate, a prof, a priest, imam or rabbi, or a project partner, or even a fleeting encounter with a stranger, and it has a lasting impact on our lives. No matter the source of the contact, it strikes me that these relationships may often have a great influence on us that we don't at the time acknowledge, nor even notice. Sometimes we don't even know the source of something that influenced our thinking or behaviour. Such influences are obviously important, for they shape our personality, our morality, our life course, and our overall contributions to our families and society. Yes, you have spent years acquiring knowledge, learning or honing new skills, and gathering together the elements of a necessary resumé for your next adventure, a job. Does it really matter if small gestures affected you, or influential people in your life helped set your direction? Does it matter if you don't know where these influences, these ideas and attitudes come from? I think it does.

When you think back on your academic years, the hard work, and the social life, the stress and anxiety, and the happy times you have experienced at the University of Guelph, I hope you will think about the friendships you've made, the people you met and the very culture of the university experience. Take away a

recollection of how you were when you came to university a few years ago, and along with knowing what you have formally learned, think of how you have developed, matured, taken on challenges, identified opportunities, gained insights into how others think and feel, how “the world turns”, so to speak.

Recognize what is in your heart, what you now can offer the world, and how to translate that into action. I would hope that some of the “lessons” learned include values such as respect, tolerance, mutuality, collegiality, kindness, cooperation, patience, perseverance, commitment, curiosity, a desire to pursue greater insight, to exchange opinions, analyze situations, and take a longer term perspective on your decisions. Not everyone will have encountered the same issues, be they positive or negative at the time, but life lessons can and will be drawn from many everyday situations. So think about this fact, be open-minded and critical, be aware of what you have absorbed. Be aware of the people you encounter and say thank you to them.

Let me give you a few personal examples of what I mean when I speak about small exchanges or experiences that can influence your life, that need be taken into account. When I was in high school, decades ago, I was shy and unconfident, and my late father was an introverted intelligent man, who worked long hours at a job he did not enjoy, that did not feel fulfilling to him, though it provided for our

family of 4, he preferred reading and watching sports on television, to any social activities. I thought of him as a bit of a recluse, but one day, when I helped out at his store, he talked to me about being kind to friends and strangers alike. What he said, has been played over in my head for over 50 years, and continues to affect me. He said that he noticed when he was in high school that most young people ignored the students who were shy, who were different, who were not popular, the students who were not demonstrative often got no attention. Maybe they didn't mind, maybe they were just private, quiet, unassuming. I don't know, but I always imagined these might be "nerdy" kids if that word would have been applied in the late 1930s. However, one young woman really caught my father's attention, because she said "Hello" and smiled equally to all whom she passed, including those others ignored. He always thought her consideration and friendliness was outstanding. He never actually used such grandiose terms as "inclusive" or "magnanimous", but the fact is, he made me aware that everyone deserves consideration, and that this young woman had a generous heart. That in acknowledging others, even with a smile, this young woman brought smiles to the faces of others. I think you will find that if you do smile at people, they will most often smile back. That makes any day a better day. I am reminded that a little kindness goes a long way.

My grandfather, an immigrant from Poland with a grade 3 education, was a gentle, soft spoken man who cared deeply and committedly for his family, extending to dozens of relatives. He had been fortunate to leave Europe before the Holocaust and successfully brought many of his family to safe harbour in Canada. Some were not so lucky, but when my grandfather spoke about his life in Poland, he did not recount the instances of discrimination, of outright anti-Semitism, or the loss of several branches of his extended family. Instead he told me, that truly there were good people in Poland and that we should seek out the good people, that in every culture and community, among every faith and ethnicity, there are good people, and they are no different from us in their wants and needs, their desires, and hopes. So, I have travelled extensively around the world, and always remembered to see the good in all people, and to find the people with whom I can share what's important, and to build lasting friendships with people of all backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and creeds. We all have a basic human spirit with the capacity to cherish friends and value differences in a positive way.

When I began my career, following graduation from UBC's School of Social Work, I went to work in a small provincial agency, the Social Planning and Research Council, based in Vancouver. One of my first tasks when I was only 23 was to hire

my own secretary. It turned out that the woman I hired had 12 children, all of them living at home when she began working with me. Jokingly she said to me, after shocking me with the facts about the make-up of her family, that arranging dinner was as simple as opening a can of tuna. Of course I never believed that one can feed them all, but it was Jenny's warmth, humour, her fortitude and quiet persistence in finding her own fulfillment when coming back to work while raising a family, that has stayed with me. I admired her, learned about patience, resilience, and compassion from Jenny, as well as how to stretch a dollar.

My second hire was for a part time colleague as the work around me grew, and again, I hired someone older and more experienced than myself. The woman I hired was twice my age, and of European background. She had a firm, quiet dignity, a great command of expressive language, and a twinkling eye, and she spoke often about learning from others, about interpreting every moment as a teaching or learning moment. So, I thank my dear departed friend Lenore, for influencing me to think about how small things matter. She spoke about and demonstrated integrity, respect, dignity, and tenacity. Sometimes in words, sometimes in allegory, sometimes just in recounting her own struggles.

She was a dear friend, though the age of my mother, but a true friend who would have pulled me out of any hole, covered my backside so to speak, or sat me down and talked me through any conflict. Always she emphasized this, be true to yourself.

One last story, and this comes from a very much more spiritual place, but the context in which I heard it is less important than the substance of what I heard. I can't recall which rabbi delivered this message. I attended very few synagogue services in my early adult life, though I visited synagogues in every country to which I travelled whether in Asia, Africa, or Europe. I recall a sermon about the importance of "truth or loving kindness", and when kindness is more important than truth. Now, who would put those two words together in an either / or statement? Ought we not always to speak Truth? Ought we not always to be Kind?

Well, this is not about speaking truth to power, which I uphold as a virtue, this is not about breaking bad news to people who need to know something even if unpleasant, nor about speaking the truth in testament which for legal and ethical reason is an imperative. Truth must be upheld and should rule the day in order for justice to be upheld. However, in human relationships, truth can hurt, such as

when someone pointedly tells you that your dress is not attractive, or your friend has gossiped about you, or when you use it as a weapon to get something you want. Think of friendships and the lasting impact of speaking a truth that is not necessary to convey. Softening a message in order to be kind, such as in complementing someone, accepting their contribution or gift, acknowledging their offer of assistance even when you don't need it, are ways of expressing kindness and showing appreciation to another person. Sometimes, just saying nothing is the kindness. This is I think an important area for consideration, especially today when we live in an unbelievably revealing world where too much information is often a problem. I am sure this will lead to debate at your dinner table if you ask, "is truth always an imperative in human relationships"? Some people might think I am advising that if you have an affair you ought not disclose it, or if you have cheated a friend, you should not tell the truth. I am not speaking of deception, nor condoning any lies. I am trying to define that small place for not speaking unkindly, not spreading gossip, not destroying another's confidence or reputation, nor for emboldening oneself at the expense of another person.

So, I stand before you, humbled by the experience of being here to address you. I know some of you have immediate after graduation plans and others of you not so much, but I am sure you will all find your way. Have confidence in yourselves,

celebrate your achievements, both scholastic and in all other areas of your life, go forward and have much success. I know my words will be soon forgotten, but this is what I hope for each of you; that you pay attention to small things in life, acknowledge people who come into your life, think for yourself about what matters and about what should be remembered, use what you learn to influence both your life and the world, and let it all be in a positive, constructive and humanizing way. Remember, all people matter, at the core, no matter our various cultures, ages, faith, ethnicity, gender or education. All people want a better future and together we—now YOU—can achieve it. My personal best wishes to each and every one of you. Have a joyous day !