

Convocation Speech



MADAME CHANCELLOR, MR PRESIDENT, FACULTY MEMBERS, GRADUATE STUDENTS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, FRIENDS AND FAMILY...

Good evening.

It is a great honor for me to be standing here before such a distinguished group of faculty and graduates from my Alma Mater where 30 years ago I used to haul my heavy guitar case around the campus, rushing to rehearsals, gate-crashing Wine and Cheese parties at the Graduate Students Union, giving recitals at Hart House, attending lectures at the Medical Building and conniving to get invited to dinners at Massey College... since then... I have been on a most extraordinary journey, all thanks to a little wooden box with strings attached... as well as my determination to make it mine.

As graduates you are about to embark on your own extraordinary journeys and create your own life adventures. I congratulate you for the hard work that has led you here today. Those hours of slaving away studying and those pressured times of examinations...well, that is now behind you. A new chapter is about to begin. A myriad of new challenges and options are on your horizons.

I would like to briefly describe the philosophy that I have embraced while on my musical journey which took me from Castles of Kings and Palaces of Maharajas, to mountain villages in Burma and Thailand, to the most important concert halls in England, Japan and Germany, sometimes experiencing the power and beauty of a symphony orchestra accompanying me, to remote communities in the Yukon and NW Territories, to Mother Teresa's hospice in Calcutta, from outdoor arenas with thousands of screaming fans, to private serenades for some of the world's most powerful leaders, to many solo concerts to help raise funds for causes I believe in... and a life where music has been my solace, my best friend and my gift to the world.

Tonight I would like to touch on some ideas I consider worthy of reflection. Firstly, the well worn adage Carpe Diem, seize the day, or in the words of Robert Herrick "gather ye rosebuds while ye may". We must value each day and savor each moment, selecting with wisdom and discretion which opportunities we pursue. I believe the most memorable and meaningful parts of my life have been when I did indeed seize those moments...they come but once and are there to enrich our journey.



Secondly, if we want to accomplish something extraordinary in our lives... and, some of you will...we must follow our passion and focus on our dreams, letting nothing or nobody dissuade us. We must forge new paths and not simply follow in well-trodden ones. We must become obsessive and consumed by our desire for whatever it is that moves our soul. We mustn't worry if our friends think we are a little off balance or eccentric. Would Albert Einstein have produced anything great if he worried about being normal? On the other hand if you opt for a pleasant, uncomplicated, and who knows, probably more peaceful and less stressful life this advice had better be ignored. Simply follow the crowd. As the good mother advises her daughter, "just stay at home and nothing will happen to you!"

But, if we can find a way to be original and creative in every area of our daily lives, then... adventures will be ours for the taking. Risk is an essential ingredient for an adventurous life. Nothing ventured nothing gained. As a musician, a performer, a composer and a self confessed travelholic, I have had to take a thousand risks following my own muse. The creative life is by its very nature fraught with risk. You need a pioneer spirit in order to break new ground and a delicate balance of being open to new ideas, learning from others, yet... remaining true to your own ideals and aesthetics, heeding always the words of Hamlet "To thine own self be true."

One thing is for sure, it will often be tough going. There have been many times when I have been attacked by critics, filled with self-doubt, afraid of failure and ready to quit. Somehow I managed to find the strength to pursue my vision, swim against the mainstream and navigate through the sharks and naysayers. In the male dominated guitar world it ain't always easy!

Yet sometimes so much of life seems to be a matter of pure chance. I've reflected on how seemingly insignificant events can completely change one's life. If you'll indulge me with a few personal anecdotes I'll give you some examples of what I mean.

During the First World War my grandfather, at the last minute, shoved a can of sardines into his army jacket. The enemy shrapnel heading for his heart was deflected, and his life was spared. Without that sardine can I wouldn't exist. How strange that my father and I owe our lives to a can of fish! Years ago in Spain my mother made a last minute request that my father dash back to a music store and buy a cheap guitar as a souvenir to take back to England. Obviously, that souvenir changed my life. A few years later my mother took me to a concert, yet another life changer. All of us can think of such examples. It is almost too scary to contemplate, as we have no way to foresee

the repercussions of trivial decisions in our lives.

Many people subscribe to the philosophy that our lives are preordained, that it is not up to us, but that our individual astrology, fate, destiny, whatever you like to call the superior power, has already mapped out our course. Who knows... it may well be. I, for one, am pretty convinced that much of it is out of our hands.

But I would like to believe that many times we do have options and that our individual efforts can determine our futures. We can make things happen and take more control. Unfortunately when presented with opportunities we often decide not to take them because of apathy, laziness, fear or insecurity. Our lives can be so much richer if we learn to step into the unknown and welcome the spontaneous moment... if we are curious enough to look around the corners, and, even if we take a wrong turn perhaps an unexpected encounter awaits us, a surprise destined for us alone. One empirical fact about our life is that we can never know what will happen a day or a minute in advance. The unexpected awaits us with each breath.

Life is a mysterious maze filled with twists and turns, crossroads and many dead ends. We must try to enjoy the journey at every point. Even the errors and disasters we create must eventually serve some purpose, if nothing more than to give us deeper appreciation for our triumphs, and teach us the way not to go. So... enjoy the hills and valleys with which the road of life challenges you and dare to take that road less traveled. Every moment is ephemeral and can never be duplicated. That is what I have come to appreciate the most about giving a concert, those unique times of epiphany, when the artist, the instrument and the audience are as one. It will never happen the same way ever again. On the other hand, after a less than perfect concert thank goodness that moment will never happen again!

Our world is filled with people eager to tell us that our dreams are impossible. Their negativity can kill our enthusiasm. It's a constant challenge. We have to be strong-willed, block out those voices and listen to our own inner spirit, our own authentic voice. It will not guide us in the wrong direction. When I was six, I was thrown out of my nursery school choir and told I couldn't sing. I believed it all my life. Trust me... I didn't always know how to follow the advice I'm now offering you! On my first day of university during the Faculty of Music's entrance exam I literally burst into tears as I couldn't for the life of me harmonize Oh Canada. It was mortifying. After my first reviewed recital, along with 5 other students, the Toronto Globe and Mail dismissed me as "showing little promise", yet... I, alone, went on to have a successful concert and recording career. Perhaps my British school motto "Aim High" seeped into my subconscious and propelled me towards my journey.



If you succeed in making your work and your career from the thing that moves you most...be it an environmental cause, a new frontier of science, a political vision, a calling to help humanity, a desire to construct the architecture of the future, to write great symphonies or to simply pluck six strings of a guitar...then you are one of the lucky people whose passion will inspire you to succeed, to invent, and to create.

Writers, dancers, artists sacrifice their health, even their lives, for their art. Scientists work for years on their theories and experiments, depriving themselves of normal pleasures until their goal has been accomplished. I know that we're not all going to do things of great magnitude, however, on a smaller scale, each and every one of us can contribute something of value. Therefore I encourage you, in whichever way you can, to be original, to be creative, to follow your passion and to follow your dreams. But also remember ... life is not just the destination... it is the journey. To quote from the Greek poet Cavafy ... "pray that the road is long, full of adventure, full of knowledge, that the summer mornings are many."

I mentioned before about being obsessive. Some see obsessiveness as only a negative trait. I see it in a positive light, as it goes hand in hand with passion and is an essential ingredient of the creative mind. My friends, the great Canadian songwriters Leonard Cohen and Gordon Lightfoot did not write their masterpieces by scribbling a line here and there in between a normal life. They fell in love with words and phrases and melodies, often staying up all night... writing...making mistakes... perfecting...rewriting... anguishing... until the magic happened and the song was born. I know about this as I do the same. Artists need to be loners. They have to be obsessive if they want to create something that resonates in the hearts and minds of others. Could Ludwig Von Beethoven have written such magnificent symphonies if he was a nice, sociable guy? Could Chopin have left us those immortal Nocturnes if he had not been so driven? Could Glenn Gould have recorded his Goldberg Variations if he wasn't consumed by his passion for the music of Bach?

Eleanor Roosevelt once wrote " The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams. " We are all unique but I think the luckiest are the people who challenge themselves to dream impossible dreams, make them a reality, and... ultimately leave behind... a legacy. Yes, I feel we are here to give back something to our fellowman and make a positive difference in the lives of others... to be grateful every day for our blessings and to never stop learning.

Now that you are graduates this is the most critical time for life changing decisions. What steps will you choose to take tomorrow now that the real world awaits you? This is the time to discover your life's destiny... so be adventurous, be spontaneous, and dare to be different in a world of media which seduces us all to conform.

I'm not accustomed to public speaking. My fingers usually do the talking better than my voice. I didn't mean to lecture...you've had enough of that...but I hoped to make you think about how you how your upcoming decisions will impact the rest of your life... and may it be an adventurous one... filled with great accomplishments, variety, and challenges.

I feel so privileged to share this special time with you. We will never again be together exactly as we are tonight. It has been my honor to address you and to accept, with great appreciation and gratitude, this Doctorate of Laws.