

Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

Upon accepting an Honorary Degree from the University of Toronto

Convocation, University of Toronto June 16, 2009

The last time I was on this stage was exactly 3 years ago, in June, during convocation, when I was Chancellor of this eminent university. Today, I am here in a different capacity, and I am deeply honoured by our university.

Convocation ceremony is an important occasion in any student's life, and I will always remember my first graduation 47 years ago at the other university. The ceremony took place on the football field, and it was a beautiful spring day.

I came to Canada on a student visa, and I was not supposed to stay. I guess it is my karma that, 50 years later, I am still here.

Our generation was very different from yours, and so were our expectations. Among the graduating girls at Royal Victoria College at McGill, there were many who were getting married upon graduation, and others who were going to graduate school or joining the workforce. I was going to do both, that is – get married and get a Masters degree in Library Science.

I was happy that my father came to attend my graduation and my wedding. Did I have other grand plans in my head at that time? No, and nothing was expected of me either. In my day, the reason to educate girls was so that they could bring up educated children.

I got married but decided against the Library Science programme because I felt the need to learn more outside of school. I realized that, for years, throughout high school and university, I didn't have much time to read widely. And, having grown up in Hong Kong, I came to Canada with no practical skills that most Canadians took for granted, such as sewing, cooking and baking, etc. I needed to learn these skills which would give me greater independence in everyday life. And, so I took time out to learn all that.

Very recently, I was interviewed by a PhD student from OISE for her thesis on leadership among immigrants in Canada. One of the questions was, when I first came to Canada, did I set a high goal for myself? The short answer was “No.” However, that interview made me think about my life in Canada, and how I got to where I am today.

What came to mind immediately was the fact that I love learning and I am inquisitive. Learning is a very big part of my life. I am always taking lessons and always reading. What lessons am I taking now? I am taking French, and I intend to master it.

Learning doesn't necessarily have to do with school or getting a degree, even though I have returned to school a number of times. I want to learn something new everyday, and it can be as simple as learning how to make perfect meringues. And, I do make perfect meringues!

I'll tell you another example. On one of our trips to England, we were in a small town where volunteers were decorating the church for Easter with bunches of lilac cut from the lilac bushes. I had never managed to have cuttings of lilac lasting more than a few hours, so I asked one of the ladies what they did to make them last over the Easter weekend. I found out that the trick was to put the cut ends in boiling water to seal them. It was a Eureka moment for me, because I have finally mastered the use of fresh cut lilac for decorations!

I am in no way making light of academic studies as you know my own academic journey. I want to congratulate all of you who are receiving your degrees today. You should be proud of your achievements as much as your university is proud of you. In particular, your parents, spouses and children should be even more happy and relieved that you have finally done it! Have your big plans and pursue them. However, do keep in mind that this is not the end but a new beginning. You have taken another step up the ladder, but there are many more steps ahead of you.

Talking about steps up the ladder of life, I remember, after having three children, I decided that, down the road, I didn't want to be only known as somebody's wife, or somebody's mother. In other words, I needed to achieve something on my own. And, that was a deciding moment in my life. Interestingly, a couple of years ago, at the Liberal Leadership Convention,

someone came up to me and asked me whether I was Daphne's grandmother! Well, I never thought of that one when I was young.

Back to the interview by the PhD student, another question was how I felt about my achievements. I answered that it was something I never think about, because one's achievements are measured by what one can do for others. It is very important to me to always be useful in society. For as long as I am able, I will continue to do my best. Achievements should only be recognized by others, and not by oneself.

Giving back to society is another big part of my life. My appointment to the Senate of Canada gave me the opportunity to serve all Canadians instead of just Ontarians as I did before. As the first Asian in the history of Canada to be appointed to the Senate, I was immediately adopted by communities across Canada, and these communities are increasing, year after year. I am really happy that this gives me the opportunity to learn about our country from coast to coast to coast, while making many friends along the way.

I believe my love of learning, my will to achieve, my interest in people, and my sense of duty to society has got me where I am today. This is my message to you. Do keep an open mind and keep learning, because you never know what opportunities are around the corner waiting for you. Broaden your horizons, and always check the source of information that is given to you, because you will be amazed how inaccurate some people can be.

Right now, you may be on the receiving end, but the day will soon come when you can give back to society. Success is not measured by what you gain for yourself, but by your contributions to those less fortunate than you. No matter how high your IQ may be, your EQ is just as important, and that is something all of us can improve on, on a daily basis. When new challenges come your way, face them head on because that is the only way you can develop your problem solving skills. You will be successful, and have a lot of fun along the way.

On this very important day, I want to wish you great success in anything you may want to take on. My greatest wish of all to you, however, is that you will live interesting lives. **Congratulation!**