

When I was a little girl

Keynote Speech by Senator Vivienne Poy

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Good morning students, teachers and principal Reimer: I am always happy to speak to young people because it's like talking to my grandchildren, and they are about the same ages as the students here.

From the questions I received from the school, I take it that you would like to learn about my life when I was little, and what I do now. I brought pictures of myself when I was about the ages of some of the students here, so it's easier for you to relate to what I am going to tell you. You can see that I was just like many of you.

I was born into a well-off family in Hong Kong in 1941 during the Second World War in Europe. When I was 6 months old, the Japanese invaded Hong Kong, and 18 days later, the governor of Hong Kong surrendered. Overnight, my family became refugees in China, and we lived there for the next 4 years.

Even though I was very small, I have a lot of memories of our life in China. I had no toys and no shoes because leather was used for soldiers' boots. I wore wooden clogs. When we returned to Hong Kong after the War, I was 4 1/2 years old. At the beginning, the schools were not established yet, and there was food rationing. I remember what we didn't have in those days, and that has made a deep impression in my life.

What I learnt from my early years was that, no matter how well off your family may be, everything can disappear overnight. For that reason, I never want to waste anything, especially food. That's the effect war has on people who have lived through it. I also know that I need to keep learning, because ultimately, knowledge is the only thing you have when you lose everything you own.

After we returned to Hong Kong, I was old enough to appreciate the beauty of nature. What impressed me most were the lovely sunsets. I would remember the

beautiful sky when I went to sleep. The next day, I would paint from memory with watercolours. I painted before I could read or write, and the only person who appreciated them was my Dad. He used to always ask to see them when he came home from work.

Throughout my childhood and my youth, my favourite pastime was painting. When I was about 8 or 9, my parents had friends who lived downstairs from us. The wife was an artist of classical Chinese painting, and I used to go to learn from her after school. She told my parents that I had talent and should take proper painting lessons.

I never got into trouble when I was young because my parents always knew where I was. Growing up, I had a table set aside in my bedroom, which usually had a painting in progress on it, as well as various watercolours. I used a separate desk for homework so that my paintings were not disturbed.

By the time I was 11, during the summer holidays, I was taking painting lessons everyday from well - known artists, the same way you would go to summer day camp. Despite my love of this art form, I never thought of being an artist when I grew up.

What I really wanted was to become a singer and performer on stage. I loved singing, and was in both the school and the church choirs. My parents arranged for me to take singing lessons from a music professor, but within a year, I realized that it wasn't going to work because I don't have a strong voice. So eventually, the only singing I did was to my children when they were little. We used to sing together when I put them to bed.

My love of academic work started about the same time, and I became very competitive in school. I went to a co-educational grant school (supported by the government, the Church of England, and the parents of the students.) It was well known for its high academic standing in Hong Kong, and was very inexpensive. Even in high school, we only paid \$48HK (\$7 Can) a month / student. I used to like competing with the boys in my class.

At that age, like most children, I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life since the singing hadn't worked out. The person who had the greatest influence on me was my Dad. He was very hard working because he enjoyed his work. He was trained as a civil engineer, and later, became a very successful businessman. He believed strongly in fairness in his treatment of others.

What was most unusual about him in business were his values. He believed that creating employment for people, and making it possible for poor children to go to school, was more important than making a profit. He became a very well respected person in every level of Hong Kong society. He volunteered his time for many good causes, especially for organizations with a low profile that needed his help.

At age 15, I was sent to England to a boarding school. And at 18, I came to Canada on a student visa to study at McGill. I was an honour student in the History Department. You see, besides painting, I love reading about real people and real events, so that's why I like History. At that time, I wasn't supposed to stay in Canada. I stayed because I married a Canadian after I graduated, and I have been here ever since.

Those who don't know me well wonder why I went into fashion design after I had my three children. To me, fashion design is a practical extension of my love of painting. I was creating wearable art. My fashions were full of beautiful colours, just like my paintings. I earned a 3-year Fashion Arts Diploma from Seneca College.

Friends wondered why I didn't just draw pretty pictures, and hire people to do the technical work, instead of going to school for 3 years? The reason is, I always want to learn everything from ground up. It was very useful to me, and even today, I am still an excellent pattern maker because I still design clothes for myself.

Having a fashion business was not glamorous - it was hard work. After I graduated from Seneca College, I had a fashion business for 14 years. I was the designer, the pattern maker, and the stylist during fashion shoots, as well as meeting clients in my boutique. Staff were hired to run my production office and my Yorkville boutique. I also had a wholesale business across Canada, the U.S. and into Japan.

I used to spend one day a week in my boutique. I was always thrilled that clients came in who really appreciated my designs. One day, a couple of Americans came in while I happened to be there, and I overheard one explaining to the other that my designs were wearable art. At that time, I was selling a lot to the U.S.

Many of my designs were influenced by nature, such as patterns formed by sunlight on the trees, colours of birds, the beauty of butterfly wings, and the amazing shapes of wild flowers.

My love of books and research brought me back to writing, and then to graduate school in 1995, to study for an MA and a PHD degree. It was at that time that I closed my design company because it would not have been possible to do both.

I believe having a fashion business, publishing books, and being very active in volunteering in the community gave me public profile. Somehow, my name became known and was put forward to Prime Minister Chrétien for a Senate appointment. I was not at all political, and didn't know anyone in Ottawa. When I received the call from the Prime Minister's office, I was in the middle of my PhD programme.

Some people think that Senators are appointed because they raise funds for the political party in power, or they are very active in politics, or that they are friends of the Prime Minister. That may be true in some instances, but certainly not in my case, since I didn't know the Prime Minister, and met him for the first time when I was introduced to him just before he introduced me at the National Liberal Caucus.

The Senate is not made up of politicians and lawyers, and filled with old men as some people think. About one third are women. There are doctors, a former general, actresses, social workers, comedians, dancers, teachers, journalists, a moderator of the United Church, and even a Catholic nun. In other words, no one can really prepare to be appointed to the Senate of Canada.

Senators are expected to be well educated, and hopefully wise, and care about the welfare of Canadians. The choice of Senate appointments ultimately depends on the decisions of the Prime Minister of the day.

No one can work towards a Senate appointment. I have seen many people totally disappointed because they tried too hard. We just need to do what we do best, and the appointment might happen because we are good at what we do. I was told that, those who lobby for a Senate seat wouldn't get very far.

Being appointed as a senator gave me the rare opportunity to give back to the community in a much bigger way than I was able to do before. And, since I was

the first Asian to be appointed to the Senate of Canada, I was immediately adopted by Asian-Canadian communities across Canada. For that reason, I attend and speak at many events and travel across the country quite frequently.

A Senator's duty focuses on the community he/she represents. In my case, it's not only Toronto, but also many Asian communities across Canada.

I have been asked to explain the duties of Senators in the Senate. I will try to make this sound as simple as possible, and I am sure your teachers will help to clarify what you don't understand. Teaching kits as well as CDs have been sent to your principal.

All Bills passed in the House of Commons have to come to the Senate for review and further debate, and are voted on. All Bills have to be passed by both Houses of Parliament and receive Royal Assent before they become law.

We can also initiate private member's Bills in the Senate, as well as Motions and Inquiries on topics that are of interest. Senate Committees also do very important work in reviewing legislation, as well as doing studies and writing reports on important issues affecting Canadians.

As public servants - and Senators are public servants - it is beneficial to be widely travelled, and be worldly in outlook since it affects the way we think, and the decisions we make when we vote. I have travelled throughout my life, and feel very much at home in many parts of the world. I make friends easily with people from different countries, and always like talking to locals to learn from them.

I was also asked if I think I am a global citizen.

Yes, I do believe I am because my brain works in 3 different modes – Chinese, British and Canadian. I feel very fortunate to have made many friends around the world whom I can visit any time.

As a Senator, my constituents can and do appeal to me for help. My office has, on numerous occasions, assisted the many who asked. It reminds me of what my father used to do in Hong Kong for the community there. He was also appointed to the Legislative Council, and later to the Executive Council, in the Hong Kong government. These were voluntary positions in which one gives of oneself for the good of the people of Hong Kong. So, I am sure you know now that he was my role model.

Being a daughter, and common to his generation who were born at the beginning of the 20th century, his expectation of me was that I should be well educated, marry someone who was educated, and bring up an educated family. I have done a lot more than that, but he never lived to see it. But I have to say - I thank him every day for the example he set for me early in my life.

You remember the sunsets I used to paint when I was little. As I got older, sunrise became more important to me. I still remember very clearly the first spectacular sunrise I saw when I was about 9 or 10 years old, when we were guests at my aunt's place in the New Territories. The cocks were crowing and the birds were singing, and it was before 5 in the morning. When I think about it, I can almost feel the early morning mist on my face.

Now, my favourite time of the day is sunrise. I like to get up at daybreak, which is much earlier in the summer than in the winter. The welcome of a new day as I watch the sunrise makes me feel at peace with the world. In warm weather, I'll have my breakfast outside so that I can hear the birds singing. At the cottage, I can also hear the loons call, and see the mist rise from the lake. In this way, I am very much like my Dad who was an early riser who also loved to hear bird songs.

Today, I am still the same as when I was little. I love books, I love the beauty of simple things, and I love nature. I don't sing much anymore, and haven't painted for a long time.

My favourite past time is reading and writing throughout the year. In the summer I swim a lot at the cottage even though I am a lousy swimmer, and I love gardening. Over the past 20 years or so, I have become a keen gardener. I love growing things from seeds, or reseeded plants for the following year. These are also my best form of exercise.

In the cold months, I do indoor gardening, and while I read or write, I always have the Nature satellite station on, which provides me with calming birds, insects, water, and other nature sounds. Before this station was available, I made recordings of bird and water sounds at the cottage, and played those when the weather was too cold to be outdoors.

Writing is now my new art form, and I really enjoy it. I still design most of my own clothes, and I am very fortunate to have a designer friend who makes them

for me. I believe that, if you are a designer, you will always design. In addition to clothing, I have also designed furniture, lampposts, and jewelry.

For my young friends here today, I want you to know that, whatever habit you are developing now, will remain with you for the rest of your life. Do your best to develop good habits now. At the same time, know that we are all born with talent. Try to figure out what your talent is and nurture it. Enjoy what you do and you will do it well.

Remember, from the pictures I showed you, I was just like many of you when I was little. If you study and work hard, many of you will excel way beyond what I have been able to do in my life.