

George Brown Convocation Address

June 23, 2010

I'm honoured to have been asked to speak to the Graduates of George Brown College Business, Arts and Design programs.

There's a great spirit at George Brown and I know that its graduates are held in high esteem.

I know you're anxious to pick up your degrees, so I won't take too much of your time this morning.

I do, though, want to leave you with a few thoughts.

I think those who invited me believe I've learned something about the arts and about business over my years.

It's true – while I've been writing and performing and studying my craft for over 25 years, I've always managed my own business, owned my own recordings and pretty much planned my career.

If that sounds like I'm someone who's totally in control and knows where she's going at all times, don't be deceived.

It wasn't that long ago that I too – like you -- stood at the threshold of the future and wondered what path I would choose.

But you could say that life and my love of music swept me along into the busy life I have now – travelling and performing in so many places around the world.

There is a wonderful saying from the ancient Chinese Philosopher Lau Tsu:

“A good traveler has no fixed plans and is not intent on arriving.”

Well, I would say that certainly would apply to my own life's path so far.

Perhaps some of you sitting here today feel you can clearly see where life is leading you, what possibilities lie ahead.

Or maybe, you're like I was starting out — you know you want to do something special, but you're not at all sure what it will be.

Life, it seems to me, is a journey best made with an open mind.

Let me share with you a bit about what has happened to me.

As a country girl, I set out to be a veterinarian. I enrolled in courses in Agriculture.

And then I found that music chose me — rather than me, it.

This was a reminder at a very early age that you have to approach life with humility – because often things happen that are outside your control.

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There is always the hand of fortune and fate.

No matter how hard you work and much you think you know what you want, life sometimes takes you by the scruff of the neck and offers you surprises and changes, as well as other possibilities and opportunities — even in the heart of disappointments.

Your talents and potential, your capacity to affect change, may lie in completely different areas than where you thought they were, and sometimes you just need to go with this.

As with any journey, I felt I needed to know what the destination they call “success” meant, and on what terms was I prepared to get there.

Was the journey more important than the arrival?

Was success a physical place of material things, or was it a state of being, reached through the referencing of a particular set of compass points which were integral to my being and my beliefs?

As my life grew, I tried to find those compass points of principles, those ideals that I would stand for and live by,

They would become my mentors and elders, the talismans by which I would mark my progress.

I probably learned more than I realized when I was very young.

From an early age I was always up to something, fuelled by an insatiable curiosity and an unquenchable thirst to be “doing things”...

As a red-headed tom-boy I rambled through the lumber yards and railway tracks of the small town of Morden, Manitoba... climbing in tree-forts, and generally ticking off the boys whenever I could.

I loved the open country around our town.

In many ways it was a charmed childhood and I had excellent models in my parents.

My mother was a public health nurse and my father had his own business as a livestock dealer.

The community was small enough that everyone knew each other and looked after each other.

And as with many rural communities there was a high value placed on both self-sufficiency and community service.

One of my fondest childhood memories is of my father during a March blizzard, being called out to assist in taking an expectant mother to the hospital.

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We still had a sleigh and team of horses on the farm, and so once he had dropped off the woman at the hospital, he came driving down our street — team of horses and all — and I remember being so proud.

Similarly, I remember on various occasions joining my mother on some of her Christmas day visits to the elderly and disadvantaged, as she would drop off some food and Christmas cheer.

On various occasions over the years our family was the recipient of acts of generosity, in good times and in bad.

It was just something people did and these simple, often spontaneous acts of kindness seemed more an extension of one's sense of honour than anything else.

On one level, these are simply wonderful memories. But for me they were also the life- shaping influences that form the roots of strong communities.

Those are the kind of communities I hope you all belong to, or find in your journey — communities which take charge and take responsibility for themselves and their own well being:

through a shared belief that our destinies and survival are hinged on our ability to look after each other...

and through a self-assertiveness which says, "I would rather take charge of my destiny than have it thrust upon me."

I learned that not only could taking charge of one's destiny be beneficial to my career, but perhaps was an integral underpinning of a healthy democratic society.

And if it is true that democratic states exist in degrees, then surely the healthier ones were those whose citizens treated the democratic process as a participatory sport, not a spectator one.

I learned that whatever I was going to get out of my life, my career or my society, it was going to be in direct relationship to what I put into it.

The good things in my life have not simply fallen out of the sky or come to me just because I wanted them to or because I felt I was entitled to them.

I actually had to work at them, be patient and prepare myself as best I could for when opportunity would knock.

I would estimate my success in the music business has been maybe a third talent, a third hard work and a third just plain luck of timing.

In 1985 I made my first recording — in one week after borrowing the money from my parents which they had earmarked for my university education.

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I never did achieve that university education, but I think you could say I was pursuing learning all the time.

As I mentioned, I made that first recording in one week (which of course I would love to do now), ran off 30 or so cassettes and after I had given the usual complement to friends and family, decided to play outside the St. Lawrence market in Toronto in order to sell the remaining cassettes.

Over the course of four years I ran off many more of these cassettes and continued to sell them directly to the public.

I was living in Stratford, Ontario and I developed a new routine.

I would load up my harp in my Honda Civic (The size of car dictated the size of my harp!) on a Friday night, travel in to Toronto from Stratford, crash on a friend's sofa in order that I could get myself down to the market early to secure the best busking spot.

I would come to find that, between doing this and singing down at Harbourfront on a Sunday afternoon, this was a rather lucrative way of making money – around \$700-800 a weekend.

From time to time there was an issue of being stigmatized by the perception that this was a fancy way of begging.

I remember seeing a friend of mine from Winnipeg who I hadn't seen for many years, emerging from the back of a crowd of people with tears running down her face, saying "Oh, Loreena, has it really come to this?" and me replying, "well, thankfully it has," as I tucked my earnings away.

Over those years I would take the money I earned from busking and pour it back into my next recording or tour.

By 1991 I could finance my own recordings in such a way that it allowed me to strike a less than usual deal with the Warner Music group – one that gave me a great deal of control over my own business and allowed me to protect the creative autonomy of my work.

As a result of that partnership, I have been fortunate to find my recordings in over 40 countries around the world. And I've reached a kind of material and creative success that is far beyond what I could ever have hoped.

I have gathered so many wonderful memories over the years.

I worked hard, fate took its course and I found my own way in the music business:

But it was not only in the music business that fate took me by the scruff of the neck. And fate was not always kind.

In the summer of 1998 my partner along with his brother and work colleague perished in a boating incident in Georgian Bay.

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Their families and I decided that we would not let such a sacrifice go unmarked.

We sought for the opportunity inherent in this most tragic of circumstances.

Surely the greatest tribute to these young men would be to do everything we could to prevent such a similar tragedy from happening to others.

It was out of these circumstances that the Cook Rees Memorial Fund for Water Search and Safety was born, a fund which has now generated over 4 million dollars and which has found itself a player in the Canadian field of water safety.

And if life isn't unpredictable and curious enough – I got deeply involved in my community in Stratford in a way I could never have expected.

If in 1992 someone had told me that in just over a decade I would find myself as the owner of a heritage school housing a family center – I would have questioned their sanity.

And yet in November 2000, fearing its ultimate demolition, moving on a massive act of faith and a complete loss of common sense, I would find myself purchasing a 1929 six -room schoolhouse.

With a great deal of assistance, it has been guided back into the communities' use as a family centre.

Although for many years I have had a passion for older architecture, often loving and marvelling at the depth of human endeavor embodied in these beautiful buildings, it has been their stories that have fascinated me, as threads of continuity which tell us who we are and where we have come from.

It has been gratifying to be able to rescue a heritage building from demolition and allow its story to continue.

That is part of my story too: as my career in music has grown, it has offered me some wonderful opportunities.

I try to keep the right perspective on that.

Through the evolution of my career I have realized that my success has not been due to a singular effort, but often one which has involved the collaboration, contribution and good will of others, a great many others.

And I would imagine whatever you go on to do with your lives, you will find likewise.

And to this end I have felt grateful to those who often in their own quiet way have been supporting my various aspirations.

They have indeed been many, from my parents and family, my dear friends, to my community, to the many others whose names I will never know — and I do think of those who have served and serve our

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country, and who have given in some cases the ultimate price in order to afford me the quality of life and the opportunities I have been so privileged to experience.

I have tried to learn to make the most of my capabilities and aspirations by being aware of my limitations as much as my strengths.

I have learned that one does not always get what you think you want most and that there will be cruel disappointments and anguish. These are all part of the journey.

Not getting the thing you want may sometimes take you closer to the thing that you are.

I have arrived at this place by taking a journey that on the surface is very different.

But I suspect the journey that each of you is about to begin will be unique as well.

As I look back at the combination of hard work, a love of what I do and good and ill fortune that drove me forward, my journey rather amazes me – and it continues to.

I hope you too will find your journey amazing and wonderful.

The diploma you receive today symbolizes many things.

It stands for the learning you have done in your classrooms but also for what you have learned on your own – from friendships, in conversations, in long hours of silent engagement with ideas or problems, in the connections made between our instincts, our education and the world around us.

Your diploma stands for our values, and those of our families, who made it possible for each of us to take part in the privilege of learning.

It calls upon you to be responsible world citizens as you undertake a journey which can take many forms.

As I suggested earlier, it is a journey best made with an open mind.

In order to see, to understand, to experience, we must set aside the barriers of cynicism, prejudice and preconception and travel forward with a sense of curiosity, inclusiveness, diversity and love.

May each of us make the most of our journeys.

They are ours alone to imagine... and to live.

Thank you.