

2016 Government of Alberta University of Alberta Management Programs Graduation Speech given by Gwendolyn Stewart-Palmer on June 24, 2016

Good afternoon Vice-President, Vice-Dean, Deputy Ministers, Assistant Deputy Ministers, distinguished guests and not least, graduates,

It is an honour to be here giving a graduation speech to the distinguished group of graduates from the Government of Alberta Management Programs: both the Senior & Executive Managers' Development Program and the Managers' Development Program.

I have a confession to make: I am a learning junkie – I can hear you asking “How do you know that?” Well, it's all the classic signs: Perhaps some of you exhibit them as well. Let me run through the list:

- I am always looking to learn new things.
- I sign up for continuing education courses – I mean, if the law doesn't pan out, I have a certificate in picture framing.
- I argue with the op-eds when I read the newspaper over morning coffee.
- I call the 1-800 numbers on the cereal boxes because they say “Questions? Call us”, so I do. And I want you to know that Kraft Canada will send you the best Jello recipes, EVER.

But, I happen to know that I am in good company here today, because even if the graduating class has not or does not admit it, you are all learning junkies as well. Each of you has completed at least 19 days of training in areas as diverse as change implementation and management: “Leading and Managing Change”, to financial management: “Strategic Finance” to the law: Administrative and Constitutional Law (which, as those of you who have taken the course know, is truly the most exciting class on the roster!).

You are to be congratulated for your dedication to completing the requirements for graduation. Well done!

I have 2 messages this afternoon:

1. Although you have completed your program, and may feel that you are done with your continuing education, I want to share with you why it is important to continue lifelong learning: what I call the “quest for knowledge”; and
2. I would like to share with you some tips about how to continue the voyage of learning.

So, why is it important to continue your personal quest for knowledge?

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I have 6 reasons:

Number 6: Because it is human nature to continue to learn, so it is easier to “go with the flow” than swim against the current.

As Edward Paxton Hood stated in his book “*Self-Education: Twelve Chapters for Young Thinkers*” from 1852:

“Our whole life is an Education – we are ‘ever-learning,’ every moment of time, everywhere, under all circumstances something is being added to the stock of our previous attainments. These are the laws stamped upon humanity.”

So why fight human nature? Continue learning.

Number 5: You will be in good company:

Let me give you some examples of those who have shared your quest for knowledge:

- a. Walt Disney taught himself to draw and continued to learn throughout his life. He stated:

“We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we’re curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths.”

Walt Disney – whose career started with a mouse . . . and not even a real mouse.... a picture of a mouse.

- b. Alexander Graham Bell, credited with inventing the telephone, attended a few lectures in college, but continued to learn and experiment throughout his life. He is quoted as saying:

“The achievement of one goal should be the starting point of another.”

- c. Evan Carmichael comments that Bill Gates is known to read every article in Time magazine from beginning to end to learn something he didn’t previously know.

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Gates believes that no matter what you spend your time doing in life, you should never stop asking questions; never stop learning. Regardless of your profession, you can only have a significant impact by increasing your understanding of the world around you. Bill Gates still says:

“I’m excited by the possibilities. If you never stop learning, you will never stop seeing the possibilities.”

- d. Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing, was self-taught, with help from her father – and while I am not telling you to learn to do your own appendectomies, the message is there –keep learning – you can do great things.

But most of all, when we ask ourselves, whose company do I share? I say to you: Look around you in this room of graduates. You share with each other that quest for knowledge.

And indeed, you are in good company.

Number 4: It keeps your brain healthy.

There are a number of studies which validate John Rooney’s saying “the quickest way to become an old dog is to stop learning new tricks”. Lifelong learning can assist you to enjoy better mental and psychological health, reduce cognitive decline and assist in recovering from illness.

As we know – if you don’t use it, you lose it.

Number 3: You can earn more money – and let’s face it, since I for one am on the “Freedom 85” plan, earning more is better than earning less.

- Being a lifelong learner enables you to succeed in your current path.
- It opens new career prospects.
- It broadens your horizons, permitting you to look beyond where you are now, to where you wish to be in the future.

Number 2: You will be a better leader.

Continued learning gives you a broader base of knowledge to understand issues. It gives you more solutions at your disposal to solve problems.

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You can be the “go-to” person in your area – the person with the answers, the person who leads by example, the person who, when they retire, others say about them: Wow, I am sorry to see him or her leave.

And the number 1 reason: You will feel more satisfied with life:

Princeton President, Christopher L. Eisgruber, told the 2014 graduates that life is not a straight line, but is filled with twists and turns. Those twists and turns bring discovery, they demand new learning, and discovery and learning help to bring joy and meaning to human life.

He stated:

“Honoring the value of learning is not always easy, but if you do, it will make your life’s journey more fulfilling. . . . If you nurture [the] flame [of a deep and persistent love of learning within you], its glow can illuminate your path and warm your soul.”

The second aspect I would like to address is how to continue the quest for knowledge – what tips can I share with you to enable you to succeed in that desire to never stop learning:

1. Surround yourself with young people.

I like my assistant to be younger than I am (and I say that as if there was even a chance that I would find someone my age to be my assistant).

Why?

Because if you have ever tried to figure out how to operate the PVR, or use Snapchat, or send a tweet, you know that young people are bold and fearless when using technology. They don’t worry about doing something wrong. They take the device, they push every button (and I’ll admit, when my children are doing this, they can push *my* buttons especially when they take selfies on my work phone), and they stretch the edges and grow into the spaces they have created.

May we all learn with the abandon of youth.

2. Surround yourself with old people. Or, as my mother makes me say when I am speaking of her friends “older people”, because she is not old.

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There is so much knowledge out there – we may not have time to learn it all ourselves, but we don't have to learn it all ourselves. We can learn from the experiences of others. Older people and indeed, other people (not just older ones), have a wealth of experience which I find they are more than willing to share. Everyone has a talent, a skill, something that they do that makes them special.

Reach out to them, learn from them, incorporate their learning into your life. You will be richer for it.

3. Don't be afraid to make mistakes.

As I always say to articling students: Don't be afraid to make a mistake. The only way that you won't make a mistake is if you are not doing. If you are doing, you will make mistakes. And it's okay to make mistakes, own them and learn from them – but try to make the same mistake only once. Go on, "make *new* mistakes"!

In my experience, we learn more from our failures than our successes. When I come back from Court, I go over what happened there, and I ask myself – what could I have done better? It is always when things didn't go as well as I had hoped, that I find myself making a mental note: here's the tip for the next time you are in Court – or here's how to respond to that question – or when preparing, remember to think about the left field question. Those probing questions of self-examination that reinforce the learning, and make you a better person for the experience.

4. Throw yourself into the experience of learning.

Be prepared to take risks in your learning – whether it is the content that you have always been interested in, but never thought you could master. (Parenthetically let me say here that, someday, I will pass Physics 20)

Or

Whether it is a skill that you never thought you could master. You have to remember that to make an omelette, you have to break some eggs. If you don't risk cracking the shell, you will never experience that wonderful bite.

Go for it! Crack some eggs!

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5. Ask questions.

Learning of any kind requires participation. The more senses engaged in learning, the deeper and richer the learning experience.

Learning isn't a tea party, with cucumber sandwiches with the crusts cut off.

Learning is like a snowball fight –It's loud, it's messy, it's fun. It's often better with two or more of you engaged in it. Just like in a snowball fight, sometimes you throw wide of the mark, and sometimes, you can land it right on the target!

There are no silly questions in learning – the only silly question is the question that is unasked. As I say to the classes I teach here in the program – if you have a question, chances are good someone else in the class has the same question. Ask the question! What is the worst that can happen?

And the two best questions to continue learning are "How?" and "Why?"

So in closing, congratulations to the graduates for their completion of the Government of Alberta Management Programs. Today is a day for celebrating your accomplishments and to wish you the best as you move to your next "quest for knowledge"!