



REMARKS BY MICHAEL KIRBY AT SIMON FRASER CONVOCATION - *JUNE 4, 2008*

Chancellor Louie, President Stevenson, faculty members, distinguished guests and most of all, graduating students, I would like to begin by thanking the academic senate of the University for voting to award me an honorary degree. I am truly honoured.

I would also like to thank them for enabling me to become a Senator who finally, got elected to something.

I was asked to tell today's graduating students something they would find useful. Given how little of my advice my own children found useful when they were your age, I'm not confident of succeeding at the assignment President Stevenson has given me.

Nevertheless, I will try by passing on to you the best single piece of advice I've ever received. To appreciate this advice, you must first understand what you've learned during your time at university.

What have you learned? Your first reaction might be to tell me about all the facts, data, and other types of information you needed to memorize or ingest in order to pass your exams and get your degree.

But I would argue that the most valuable part of your university education is none of this. The most valuable part is how you've learned to think through problems in a logical, structured way.

Believe me, it's this method of tackling problems that will remain with you long after you've forgotten most of the facts you learned in order to pass an exam. It's this way of thinking that will enable you to successfully take on challenges in areas which have nothing to do with your formal education.

This leads to me to the best advice I ever received when I was young. In my late 20's I was offered a job as the Chief of Staff to the newly elected Premier of Nova Scotia. I was teaching at Dalhousie University at the time and most of my academic colleagues counselled against taking the job because it meant, in the words of a political science friend, entering the 'dirty world of politics'.

But a man much older and wiser than my colleagues urged me to take the job because he said "It is not the things you do in life that you regret, it is the things you don't do."

"Go ahead," he said. "Take a risk. Don't be afraid to fail. Be willing to take on a challenge in an unfamiliar environment. The way your university training has taught you to think will help you succeed."

It was that one piece of advice which made me enter government in 1970. It was that same piece of advice which made me agree to be the leading public servant on the constitutional file in 1980, to become Chair of the Task Force on Atlantic Fisheries a few years later, and to spend most of the past decade tackling first,

the issue of how to reform the health care system, and then, the mental health system.

In every case, I knew virtually nothing about the issue when I started. In every case, I took a significant risk of failure.

But a combination of good timing, superb people working with me, luck, and most importantly, the way my university education taught me to think about problems resulted in success.

You now have the skills to do the same.

Reject the strategy of playing it safe when it comes to the question of changing jobs in the future. Being risk averse will cause you to miss what would otherwise be some of the highlights of your life.

You face a future that is moving at warp speed compared to when I was young. Then, the goal for many workers was the 40-year gold watch. No one is giving out gold watches anymore.

Life changes constantly now, and you have had the good fortune to have grown up in this kind of environment. You probably can't imagine earning a gold watch. Moreover, you can probably think of nothing worse than working for the same employer for forty years.

It doesn't take a psychic to predict that you will have a number of different careers over the course of your working life and face challenges in the future that you can't possibly imagine now. Embrace these opportunities.

But also pay attention to your feelings. If you are nervous or concerned about whether you're capable of a challenge, maybe that's exactly the right challenge to take on – because you care about the outcome! Like performers on stage, you can channel your nervousness – that adrenalin rush – into the energy you need to do the job.

Believe in yourself and in the thinking skills you've acquired here at Simon Fraser. You've worked hard and long for years, many of you juggling other responsibilities, as well. You have the right to feel proud and satisfied with your accomplishments.

Take that confidence with you to the next chapter of your life. And when faced with a difficult choice, always remember:

“It's not the things you do in life that you regret; it's the things you don't do.”