

Keynote Address  
Algonquin College  
Fall Convocation Ceremony  
National Arts Centre, October 14, 2008

By

Geoff Strotmann, CET  
Manager, Supply Chain Management, General Dynamics Canada  
and  
2008 Recipient of the Honourary Degree in Applied Business

Good evening President Gillett, Algonquin Faculty, Families, Friends and of course, to you, my fellow Graduates .....It is my distinct pleasure to welcome you here tonight and to be amongst the first to offer you my heartfelt congratulations!

I am humbled to have been chosen to receive this highest honour from our College .... Especially when I consider the strength, experience, knowledge and commitment of those I have worked with on your behalf. The College draws from an amazing well of talent within our community and I have enjoyed every moment I have devoted to assisting Professor Mace, his Colleagues, the e-Business Supply Chain Management Advisory Committee and you, the Students.

I am also honoured to have been chosen to be here tonight to address you. I consider it a rare privilege to be able to share in the joy of your accomplishments and to offer you some insight from my own experience.

Tonight, I believe I can truly identify with how you are feeling and so my hope is that I may speak with you, not to you, as I articulate my thoughts on this momentous occasion .... The completion of your education .... But it's not a completion at all, it's a good start toward something greater!

If you think by closing your books you're done learning, listen up ... nope.... not by a long shot .... and that's the good news. This milestone has provided you with excellent positioning for your "professional" life. From here you have the opportunity

of a lifetime of practicing what you're learned, exploring what you don't yet know, taking calculated risks, investing sweat-equity in your goals, building on your experiences and capitalizing on the inevitable personal growth which will result.

Establishing a comfortable livelihood is likely an immediate practical requirement for each of you, and for some it may seem a tempting place to take root. I urge you all, however, to stretch your thoughts and your ambitions towards how you can build on what you have done so far. It's OK to dwell on areas of current interest or familiarity, but keep an open mind to exploring other possibilities. Seek out opportunities and be prepared to invest time and energy in your goals and aspirations.... Only by stretching will you become all you can be!

It is my personal belief that every individual is wired to be exceptional in certain areas. Typically, within those areas lie a good number of one's true capabilities, interests and passions, one's fuel for success. Consider this; successful people have often become so in areas far from how or where they started. Many, and I'd bet most, stretched to build on what they had to get what they wanted and in doing so, sometimes encountered interests they hadn't recognized and found themselves succeeding at things they'd never dreamed of. The trick is in decoding your wiring, especially early on. You, or others, may feel strongly that a certain path is your true destiny, however as you go along, you may get clues, receive advice or have thoughts to the contrary.

Successful people, by and large, don't get there on their own, they have help. For me, help did two important things... firstly it got me by the tougher times, but maybe more importantly, it also prepared me to give help later on. Recognize when you need help, and ask for it, but also recognize when you are getting help and appreciate it. Help comes in many forms, often through mentorship. In my view, true mentorship not only helps one to succeed, but helps one to recognize what to succeed at.

I offer my past as a practical example.... I love technology, always have. I started my professional career repairing electronic items, and charging for my services, at age 8. My Aunt says I actually began my “practice” under her stereo with a paring knife at 4, however, I digress. Not surprisingly, I aspired to be an electronics engineer and worked very hard, practically, to become one. I say practically, because in high school, I struggled in mathematical theory without a practical application. Determined, I worked with a tutor, an elderly lady, PhD in chemical engineering and great personal friend. Well, I didn’t have too many sessions in before she placed a hand on my shoulder and said, “Geoff, you are a businessman, you’ll never be an engineer” .... Too blunt to be a Clue, Mentorship perhaps?

Undaunted, I continued my high school studies, with reasonable success. I enrolled in night school courses in basic electricity, electronics and house wiring, held jobs in both of the TV repair shops in my town and had my own small shop and electronics repair business. I began to recognize that helping Customers with sales and technical problems was getting to be as much fun as helping disabled devices with their problems. Hmmmm ....

I developed a successful interest in the Canadian Science Fair program with projects which took me to the Nationals on two separate occasions. Oddly enough, I got more pleasure from selling the public on the benefits and market potential of my creations than I did from fielding the adjudicators’ mundane technical questions about their design, construction and, theory of operation.... Subtle enough to be a Clue looking back on it.....

My high school work complete, like a bug to a light, I sought out my future as an engineer. I was fortunate enough to have won a Canada-wide competition and a full scholarship for a 4-year Engineering Technology diploma program. But I was also accepted in a 4-year degree program at another institution. Although extremely pleased at the prospect of a free education, I held the degree program in higher esteem and was leaning towards that path. I shared my difficult decision with the owner of one of the TV repair shops I worked for. He wasted no time in advising that

“grads from that degree program can talk your ear off, but can’t really do anything”, and that I’d learn to “do” in the diploma program .... more Mentorship, I suppose.....

My diploma in hand like a lance, I sought out an engineering windmill to tilt at... What I found was interesting technical work which involved developing products and fielding them. This provided me with the opportunity to work with Customers and market the benefits of my Company’s products, some of which I’d developed myself, and to see them in operation, in a practical setting. I recognized that, through the experience I had gained trying to be what I would never become, I had developed a whole range of skills and awakened interests I had never considered ....Luck, was it? Possibly .....

My career, well established by now, has been channeled by this transformation and as a result of actually doing the things I have just spoken about. I have succeeded at an amazing array of challenging assignments which include Product Development, Quality Assurance Engineering, Production Management, Program Management, Field Support, and most recently, Supply Chain Management. I have had the opportunity to travel, face challenges, solve problems, experience things which cannot be taught, and to learn things I had never even considered. In my current work, I have come to treasure comments or thanks, from Customers and Suppliers as well as my Colleagues, for having assisted them in solving problems and improving processes, products or services, both technically and in business terms. I have found most problems and challenges to be little more than opportunities in disguise!

And now, I have received an honorary degree, which I hold in the highest esteem, in a discipline I did not originally consider, but which was indicated to me in several ways as amongst the things I was naturally wired to do. With the sense to ask for help and the good fortune of great mentorship, I was able to recognize where to focus my hard work and perseverance and, through that, discover and experience all that I have so far. And I’m not done... nope... not by a long shot ... for me, there are many more challenges to be conquered and opportunities to be explored.....

My hope, in sharing these few moments with you at such a busy and exciting time of your life, is that you will take away three of the most important lessons I've learned....

1. Ask for help when you need it .... There's no shame,
2. Seek out good mentors... the more the merrier,,,, and finally,
3. Develop a trust in your gut instincts early on. Wait too late and all your gut can tell you is what you should have done....

You have graduated from a fine institution, with a proud history, tremendous support from local professionals in both industry and commerce and great prospects going forward. It will be here long into the future, both to serve you and to be supported by you.

The Ottawa community is renowned for its ability to draw from seemingly bottomless reserves to help those in need and to invest in its future. That, my friends, comes from me, from you, from us. Don't discount the many benefits to be gained from helping .... sharing of your knowledge, skills and abilities.

And now, I wish each and every one of you graduates the very best in your futures and trust that each of you will, in your own way, stretch to realize your full potential.

Congratulations and enjoy this night .....

It's yours and it's well deserved!