

## COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS AT MBCI GRADUATION – JUNE 2007

by Art DeFehr

What a beautiful sight – a group of young people who have the ability to make this a better world!

In 1961 I sat in your place and dreamt of a world that I wanted to discover, to conquer and to solve all problems. Let me assure you – there are still plenty of problems left for you to deal with and I will challenge you to find that part of the world that you want to make into a better place.

Tonight you are sharing this most important event with your friends, but let's begin by remembering who brought you here. You are sharing this evening with a committed group of teachers who really care about you and have given of their best to prepare you for a world that is both challenging but also full of opportunity. No less important, behind you is a room full of parents, grandparents, siblings and friends who have given of themselves, often at great personal cost, to give you the opportunity to learn and become. Remember to thank them tonight and for the rest of your life.

Last week I attended a ceremony where our son-in-law was officially granted Canadian citizenship. He was born in a country where he had no personal freedom whatsoever. The judge who presided over the event was of Japanese origin whose parents had been interred in World War II. His family did not gain citizenship until 60 years after their arrival. I grew up with that judge – we went to school together at John Pritchard in North Kildonan. The event reminded me in a powerful way how fortunate we are to live in a country that welcomes people of every ethnicity, faith and color – 27 countries of origin on that particular day. You have the gift of that citizenship as a birthright – do not take it for granted.

MBCI is full of memories for me.

I was a member of the class in the year that MBCI introduced Grade 7.

I was the third on the curling team in 1960 that won the Manitoba Curling Championship and went on to compete nationally.

I also remember spending endless hours in detention but was taught to play chess by an enlightened teacher who thought that the time may as well be used to develop our minds.

In Grade 12 I was so bored with Math that two of us were asked to spend the class time in the library to study on our own - we finished the material for the grade, then did all of Ontario Grade 13 and finally were asked to teach the class near the end of the year. That was an inspired way to deal with the problem of a class of 46 students of various capacities. I went on to excel in Maths and Physics in University.

My family also played a role in the development of the School.

My father was on the building committee when the very first structure was built.

In the late fifties he was in part responsible for the Gymn. He built it to the very boundaries of the property – that is why there is that funny angle in the southeast corner – since he felt you only get one chance and the school would figure out how to use the space.

Many years later I was on the building committee when we crossed the street to create Jubilee Place and the extra classrooms. That was not the original plan – it was much more modest. I remembered my father and suggested we maximize the possibilities of our property.

I was also involved in the events that led to the relocation of Concord College – an event that created the opportunity for MBCI to develop again – I congratulate those who are responsible for the current re-development of the site.

In the future some of you will have the opportunity to contribute your energy, your ideas and your resources to keep the school relevant and effective. Stand up and be counted when your turn comes!

Winston Churchill emerged as a hero from World War II – the man who held England together during its darkest hours. After the War – as an old man – he was asked to speak at the graduation of one of the famous universities in England. The speech is famous – it was only one short sentence.

**NEVER, EVER, EVER, EVER, EVER, GIVE UP!**

Then he sat down. That speech has become immortal.

I will double up on Churchill and leave you with two ideas that you can use in your life.

The first idea: **LIVE YOUR LIFE IN REVERSE**

What do I mean by the idea that we should live our lives in reverse?

A number of years ago I was walking in the mountains of a very remote part of Nepal – on the back side of Mt. Everest. We were working on a project to use jet boats on wild rivers to develop hydro-electric dams without creating roads that were environmentally destructive. Two of my colleagues were very accomplished people and somewhat older. For several hours as we hiked up these mountain trails they carried on a very deep discussion on the subject - “How do you want to be remembered”. That may sound ego-centric – but when you reach my stage in life you realize that what you are and what people remember you for has largely already been established.

When you reach my stage in life it becomes an increasingly important question. Was that person honest, faithful and supportive to family, supportive of Community. Did he or she offer their resources and capabilities to make their community and their world into a better place. Who is that person? Did they create, build, support or were they selfish and failed to contribute what they were capable of?

I actually remember a few things from high school. A few lines of Tennyson have always stayed with me:

*All experience is an arch  
Whose margin fades forever and forever as I move.  
How dull it is to pause,  
To make an end,  
To rust un-burnished,  
Not to shine in use  
As though to live were life enough....*

We cannot know what lies around the next bend, over the next hill or through the next arch. But rest assured – unless you round that bend or climb that hill you will certainly never know. Every bend and every hill creates a new panorama, a new vista, a new set of challenges and opportunities. Only then can you make choices as to which next hill or road you will take into the unknown – and then a new vista opens before you.

Your life is an accumulation of these choices, of the risks you took, of the hills you climbed. It is said that the way to climb Mt. Everest is to start from the top and to study the path from that point to the bottom. If you start at the bottom you will never arrive at the top. Life is the same.

The language “How do you want to be remembered” is not intended as an invitation to an ego trip. It is a metaphor. All of us want our lives to matter. Every choice you make will lead you over a different hill – you will make those choices.

So the first idea I want you to remember is that in reality we live our lives in reverse.

Let me tell you a bit about my own life. First, allow me to acknowledge my life partner, Leona, who has been willing to share my crazy dreams and has always supported me. That included a lot of air miles and living in some parts of the world that were more than a little challenging. Choose your life partner carefully. Its tough if you do not dream the same dreams.

After MBCI I studied Math and Physics but after a few days underground in the Cyclotron without girls and sunlight decided that Commerce and people might be better.

Commerce was great but limiting and I decided to go to a Mennonite College in the United States to get some history, fine arts, language and theology – but I got more. Those were the incredible sixties when our generation rejected the authority of the folks

who had been responsible for empire, fascism, war and discrimination. We absolutely knew that our values were right. We marched for Civil Rights – that God created every person equal. I actually marched with Martin Luther King on the road from Selma to Montgomery. We rejected the idea of colonialism and a war to dominate a third world country that wanted to be on its own. As a reward the FBI gave me a record that destroyed my appointment to the Canadian diplomatic Service. I went to Harvard Business School and took another path.

Leona and I promised each other and God that we wanted to live a life that included service to others. We also said that we did not want to be in business more than 5 years since once the ruts get too deep you can not easily change course. I left for an assignment with Mennonite Central Committee in Bangladesh after their destructive civil war – it was 5 years to the week from my graduation. God honors our dreams and commitments.

That initial international assignment played a critical role in my life story. I developed friendships, expertise, values and interests that led to many interesting and challenging opportunities. These included work with the United Nations, the Canadian Government and private agencies in countries as varied as Cambodia, Somalia and Russia.

I consider myself unusually fortunate in that I was able to maintain a career in business and at the same time follow my international interests. With hindsight, the FBI probably did me a favor!

Many of these assignments challenged the status quo and suggested solutions outside of the comfort zone. Not every idea succeeded but many have stood the test of time. As you go through life, not every opportunity you face will be a sure bet – life is about taking risks.

That leads me to the second idea or metaphor I would like you to remember. If you are into sailing – you know that when the wind blows against the sail you retain stability by leaning in the opposite direction. In fact, the more you lean the faster you are able to travel. The metaphor I want you to remember is the term

## LEANING INTO THE WIND

If you lean too hard you will end up in the water and you lose the race. Too little and you stay afloat but the world passes you by.

What the metaphor means is that in life there is always a reality within which you can act. If you are very rigid in your views you may feel incredibly self-righteous, but the world will ignore you. If you fail to challenge injustice or tackle a problem you are capable of tackling, you also make no impact on the world around you. What the metaphor says is this:

There is always a space in life and in any situation where there is a reality. You can either duck the issue and do nothing, you can stay safely in the middle and hope that nobody notices you or demands anything of you – or you can lean into the wind. That means that you take a position that challenges the issue but you act in the space where you can still be engaged, where people still pay attention to you – but you challenge them as hard as you can. This is the space where change can happen – where you can contribute to a better world.

In Matthew 25 Jesus has the same message. He says:

*Come into the Kingdom prepared for you...*

*For I was hungry and you fed me  
I was thirsty and you gave me water,  
I was a stranger and you invited me into your homes  
naked and you clothed me  
in prison and you visited me.*

*And we will ask – When lord?*

*His answer – When you refused to help the least of these my brothers you were refusing to help me.*

Jesus invites us to be engaged with the real world in which he has placed us. He says he will remember how we engaged – so the question “How do you want to be remembered” is a very real one.

You have been born into circumstances that in most cases are among the most fortunate on our planet. Your participation in this graduation tells me you have more than your share of talent and opportunity.

In spite of individual tragedies that I do not know about – let me assure you that Canada, Winnipeg and MBCI are islands of stability, peace and prosperity. Much of the rest of the world and the experience of many even in this part of the world is not like that. In fact, our world is really not in that great shape.

- Religion is used as an excuse to kill and suppress others
- Billions do not have a roof over their head or a predictable meal
- Many would give anything to have taken your place in the classroom
- Collectively we struggle to balance our comforts with the destruction of our environment.

There are great global issues such as climate change and local issues like a friend in trouble or a new immigrant struggling to make it.

God has a plan for your life. That plan is for you to climb the hill or round the bend in front of you and accept the challenge that appears before you.

Remember these two ideas:

LIVE YOUR LIFE IN REVERSE

LEAN INTO THE WIND

Life is a great adventure – **make the most of it!**