

Living and Learning, Loving and Fishing

Peter George Convocation and Building Dedication March 31, 2017

Madame Chancellor, Mr. President, Cherished Staff and Colleagues, Student Leaders, Alumni and McMaster Donors and Supporters; My Dear Family and Dear Friends.

I am touched and so humbled by this occasion today and the honours my McMaster family have so lovingly bestowed on me. I thank you, President Deane for your kind words and would like to especially thank everyone who played a part in making this extraordinary day happen.

When I came to McMaster to teach Economics in the summer of 1965, I was 23 years old and a very nervous first time professor. I worked so hard to prepare my first three lectures so you can imagine my dismay when, in my very first class, I had finished all 3 weeks of material in 20 minutes! I dismissed the class to go and buy their textbooks, and rushed desperately to my office to prepare for the following week!

What saved me were my wonderful, generous and forgiving students, incredibly, among them our Chancellor Madame Suzanne Labarge and Board member Tom Weisz, who encouraged me and inspired me to devote my energies to teaching.

I could never have imagined in my wildest dreams back then that a day like today would come. To have this incredible honour of being made an Alumnus and officially a member of the McMaster family was already so deeply appreciated that when I found out that in addition, the new Student Centre for Living and Learning was to bear my name, I confess I did what my wife calls "the ugly cry." For "Living and Learning" embodies everything I have tried to do in all my years at Mac.

During my first 30 years here, McMaster grew its strengths in Science, Engineering, and after 1970 especially in Medical and Health Sciences.

I think we all know that in its early years, Mac WAS small and student-centered and yet by the 1990s it was known for its research-intensity and graduate programs. There had been in the mid-1980s a renaissance in Undergraduate Education initiated by President Alvin Lee, which yielded the stellar Arts and Science program, but the true integration of student life and learning, of scholarly excellence in research and the student experience was still missing a few essential pieces. It was my privilege and my joy to play a part in helping bring them together.

Now I know there are those of you out there who felt that me becoming President in 1995 was the living embodiment of that unfortunately-named phenomenon called "The Peter Principle" where you are promoted to the level of your own incompetence. I know that others were reminded of the old joke: "For years we have been standing at the edge of an abyss; Now is the time to step boldly forward!"

Believe me, no one was more surprised than I was!

Nevertheless, in November 1994, when my Presidency was announced, students were pressing the University to build a student centre, a gathering place and “home away from home” on campus, especially for non-residential students. I empathized with their dilemma and knew that generations of students had paid for a centre they would never use! I felt that McMaster had a moral obligation to build the student centre and I promised we would. And together, we did, with incredible student leadership from the MSU on this and many other projects.

But we did far more than this; we put student life, their “living” as well as their “learning” at the centre of every single thing we did – from countless new facilities and innovative programs, to doubling enrolment and physical capacity, from the first stage of the admission process to their amazing start to campus life in Welcome Week, permeating through every part of the on-campus student experience, and the post-graduation alumni experience.

Each of you, in your own special way joined me in this mazing endeavour, and I noticed and appreciated everything you have all done! Each of you played an essential part in this incredibly exciting shared endeavour. And didn’t we have fun together?

Building the Student Centre was just the beginning of several special projects that we did together, each one of which contributed an essential piece of the whole. The David Braley Athletic Centre and the Ron Joyce Stadium created a place where student wellness and school spirit could come together in one perfect gathering place. Together those three projects I believe made McMaster a place where “Living” and “Learning” finally were of a piece.

Which brings me to “Loving and Fishing,” the name that my family says should really go on that building! Fishing first, as it is also a love of mine. Some people have likened fundraising for university projects to fishing and as a fisherman, I can see the parallels, but not in the way you think. Sure it’s nice to catch a big one (and Michael G. DeGroot’s generosity will forever recall for me that feeling) but great fishing is really about respecting the fish, watching the waters, infinite patience and determination. Most of all, loving the process along the way, no matter the result. That’s why it’s called “fishing” and not “catching!”

I have loved asking people to share my enthusiasm for what we were together trying to envision and build at McMaster, and I feel very blessed to have known and befriended people I have mentioned today and many whom I have not, who understood that, like those pre-University Centre Mac students, *generativity is the true measure of a life*; that we live forever when we plant a tree under which we know we will not sit. Thank you to everyone for planting all those trees under which tomorrow’s students, even my two little daughters, Lily Rose and Gemma, may someday sit.

Living and Learning, Loving and Fishing; What have I learned in my years of living and loving at Mac? If you make a mistake, own it, sooner rather than later – and then do all you can to make it right. Listen to everyone who comes to your door and especially seek out those with a different point of view. Dream big, technicolour dreams and then work as hard as you can to make them happen. If you love what you do, jump out of bed every day raring to go like I did and even a crazy busy job will be a delight!

I never worked a day in my life at Mac! I was blessed with loyal and superb staff who made every day at work a joy; inspiring colleagues whose excellence in their fields drove me to find more resources for them to make their ground-breaking discoveries, an amazing team of administrators who were each brilliant in their own fields; awe-inspiring alumni who went on to do incredible things that made us all proud, generous donors whose altruism made so much possible and above all, the thousands of wonderful students who it was my privilege to meet, befriend and learn from over my 45 years at McMaster. Thank you to each and every one of you!

Which brings me to Love. Yes, I have loved my work, *but I have loved my family and friends even more*. My family has always been my biggest booster. Ally, your love came along to save me when I was lost and in despair. Your faith in me buoyed up my confidence and raised me to the heights of professional success, of personal fulfilment, and of love, and has been the solid, loving core of our family since first we met. I am still besotted by you, madly and deeply in love with my unforgettable Ally in life, forever.

To Mike, Janie, Lily Rose and Gemma, our 6 grandchildren, and my sister Karen, you have been sources of great fun and pride, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart. I love you and can't imagine life without you.

And so many dear friends who are here today, and those unable to attend; What a splendid difference you have made in my life! I love you all so much!

There is one other unfortunate expression associated with my name; "Petering Out," a term I have never much liked.

It is a transition we all must make, but when one retires and the river isn't running right to your door, there can be a tendency to feel as if your life and endeavours might "Peter out" just a little.

You have run your leg of the race as best you could and safely passed on the baton, but there is no guarantee of the eventual outcome.

These honours today and the kind words and wishes of all of you have gone a long way to feel as if my work at McMaster will not "Peter out" any time soon, and for that I thank you from the bottom of my heart!

All of you know that I have not been well and I did want to share with you one final story about that chapter of my life. The first time I went into the hospital to have my blood taken, I sensed an urgency as lab technicians and nurses suddenly came running and I overheard one of them say "We've never seen anything like this before: *The blood in his veins seems to be grey, but in the arteries after it passes through what turns out to be an unusually large heart, it is MAROON!*"

So you see, that is what was wrong with me all along! An incurable case of McMasteritis! Thanks to each and every one of you for tending me and caring for me as I lived with this chronic condition for so many years!

I want to close with some of Walt Whitman`s words from ‘Song of the Open Road`

Afoot and light-hearted, I take to the open road,

Healthy, free, the world before me...

...Whoever you are, come travel with me!

Traveling with me, you find what never tires...

Be not discouraged – keep on –

There are divine things, well envelop`d.

I swear to you there are divine things

More beautiful than words can tell...

All seems beautiful to me;

I can repeat over to men and women

You have done such good to me,

I would do the same to you.

Thank you so much for a lifetime of Living and Learning, Loving and Fishing and thank you for these humbling honours and this beautiful day.

- Peter George