
2-24 South Academic Building
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada T6G 2G7
Tel: 780.492.3212
Fax: 780.492.9265
www.president.ualberta.ca

**Honorary Degree
University of Alberta**

June 8, 2016

SERENDIPITY

**I.V. Samarasekera, OC
President Emerita
University of Alberta**

- Eminent Chancellor Young, President Turpin, Board Chair Phair, graduands, academic colleagues, staff and friends.
- Thank you Chancellor Young for that very special introduction.
- My heartfelt thanks to the Senate for the Honor of this degree, especially from a University that I cherish, a place where I spent ten remarkable years!
- Thank you to the Class of 2016 for the opportunity to share convocation with you. This is an exciting day in your lives, congratulations! A day of celebration of hard work and ingenuity!
- All you want to do right now is to celebrate, so most of you are hoping that I am brief!
- Fortunately, engineers are not known for great oratory or lengthy speeches.
- When Orville and Wilbur Wright, pioneers of the first flying machine, were invited to dinner to celebrate their success, the host of the evening invited Orville to say a few words.

- Orville stood up and said Wilbur will speak. Wilbur then took the podium and said Orville just did and sat down.
- Now that's brevity you remember!
- Graduating from a great university was an important life goal for you. It took me ten years to get a U of A degree!
- Your parents and families expected you to graduate but some can't believe you did. You have no idea how relieved they are! Now is a good time to ask for money! Perhaps a new car, a down payment on a condo! Go for it.
- While today is about expectations fulfilled, reflect back over your four years and think of the many times the unexpected happened and the unexplained changed your life's course.
- Perhaps you landed a dream job, which took you by surprise. Perhaps you met your true love through an unexpected encounter. Perhaps you had a life-altering travel experience.
- These amazing opportunities do happen and we don't always realize how significant they are at the time.
- 40 years ago when my husband and I were graduate students at the University of California, we were invited to lunch to the home of a friend of my Dad.
- At first we were reluctant to go since we had so many unfinished assignments and deadlines. Not wanting to seem ungracious we accepted the invitation.
- At lunch we met a gentleman named Kulbir Singh. In the course of conversation, the gentleman realized that we were looking for work after finishing our degrees.
- Although, a complete stranger, he invited us to visit him in Canada, and said that he could arrange for a job interview at the company he worked for.

- He lived in Vancouver, a place we had never heard of, in a country Canada we had yet to visit.
- We decided to accept his invitation on a whim. This chance encounter led to a job for my husband and 40 wonderful years in Canada.
- These amazing moments in one's life are called serendipity.
- We might think of serendipity as dumb luck but it is much more than that.
- The word serendipity was coined by an Englishman, Horace Walpole, who became enthralled by a Persian fairy tale about three princes from the Isle of Serendip.
- The three princes were always making remarkable discoveries they were never in search of.
- He suggested that this fairy tale had tremendous insights about human genius, which he termed "serendipity" – the gift of making fortunate discoveries by accident.
- Now Serendip is the former name for Sri Lanka where I was born, so I have always been intrigued by the importance of serendipity.
- Is it possible to become more serendipitous? There are many serendipitous moments but we don't always follow through. It is our willingness to pursue the unexpected that leads to unsought for discoveries.
- In a recent New York Times article, "How to Cultivate the Art of Serendipity" Pagan Kennedy who has studied the subject, identifies three kinds of people.
- Some she called "non-encounterers", individuals who stuck to their "To do" lists, so tightly focused when searching for information, that they rarely wandered off the margins.
- Then there were the "occasional encounterers" who stumbled into moments of discovery now and then.

- However the most important were the “super-encounterers” who appeared to have special powers of perception, intuition, and good luck.
- How do we all become super encounterers? Why is it important?
- In a recent study it was found that nearly two-thirds of people ended up in their careers due to serendipity.
- Fifty percent of modern inventions were also the result of someone stumbling on a novel solution by accident. Penicillin, the computer, microwave oven and even rock and roll were discovered by accident.
- So how do we cultivate serendipity?
- Here are some steps that have worked for me.
- The first is taking risks and being open to unexpected opportunities.
- If my husband and I had decided not to take up the offer to visit Canada and interview for a job, which seemed so unlikely, I would not be here.
- Wiseman, a psychologist and author of the book the "Luck Factor" says that lucky people pursue unexpected opportunities like this all the time. He says they incorporate simple things in their life that open them to novel experiences.
- They chat to strangers at work, in the bus or in a queue, they attend social functions where they meet people outside their social circle, they make it a point to go to interesting places people normally don't visit.
- So Step 1 take risks, pursue novelty, and put your selves out there.
- Step 2, go with your gut, trust your intuition. When I was choosing a research topic for my master's thesis I was very methodical which led to a very boring subject.
- For my doctoral thesis I took the opposite approach. I chatted with a number of professors to find something that interested me. One of the professors was a young, dynamic individual named Keith Brimacombe. He

pulled out a napkin from his desk drawer on which he had recorded a conversation he had in a bar with someone from the steel industry.

- Although I knew nothing about the steel industry or the problem they had discussed over a drink, I was intrigued - the topic lit a spark in me. I recall being a little daunted at first since almost nothing had been done on the topic. There were no long lists of papers I could review to become more knowledgeable.
- However I realized that if no one had done much in this area it could prove to be a gold mine which it did, resulting in exciting discoveries which were implemented by the steel industry.
- So trust your gut and don't always allow logic to blind your decisions!.
- Alexander Graham Bell's words are particularly prescient.
- "Don't keep forever on the public road, going only where others have gone. Leave the beaten track occasionally and dive into the woods. Every time you do so you will find something you have never seen before. Of course it will only be a little thing, but do not ignore it. One discovery will lead to another and before you know it, you will have something worth thinking about.".
- Finally, Dream. Dream big. Knowing what you want from life will allow you to recognize opportunities when they present themselves serendipitously.
- When the position of Vice-President research opened up at UBC, my friends nominated me for the job, since they knew I have a passion for research and discovery.
- It was also an entirely new thrust for me. After teaching engineering for twenty years here I was learning about health research, quantum computing, artificial intelligence, anthropology, humanities – you name it.
- I recall one occasion when I was vice-president research and was headed out the door to give a speech, my son asked me what the topic was. I told him it was about health research. He said "you know nothing about the subject". "You are correct I don't" I replied, "but neither does the audience!"

- So this is how a career in engineering led to a university presidency – University of Alberta.
- Many of the important moments in my life which set the course I followed were shaped by serendipity - chance encounters with the right people and ideas
- Serendipity will play an important role in your life too.
- You can cultivate serendipity - take risks, trust your intuition and be in touch with your dreams.
- By the way if you want to experience the magic of serendipity do visit the island of Serendip, now known as Sri Lanka. Be sure to take John Barth's advice in your plans.
- "You don't reach Serendip by plotting a course for it. You have to set out in good faith for elsewhere and lose your bearings... serendipitously!
- CONGRATULATIONS!