

Carleton University Convocation

Helen Branswell's Address

June 21, 2022

Madame Chancellor, Mr. President, graduands and honored guests,

I am deeply humbled to receive this honor and would like to thank Carleton for recognizing my work in this way.

But today is not about me. This is your day and I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to all you soon-to-be graduates, the members of the class of 2022 gathered here today.

You have worked hard to make this day a reality and you deserve this opportunity to revel in your accomplishments. The Covid-19 pandemic has made the past two years incredibly challenging, and it will have changed your university experiences in unexpected and unwelcome ways. But you have persevered, to your great credit.

I have been reporting on Covid since the beginning of January 2020, and I have spent most of that time seated at a desk in my apartment in Boston. For the first 20 months of the pandemic, I couldn't come back to Canada to see family or friends. It was an isolating time.

I'm sure many of you also experienced isolation and separation during the past couple of years as well. And some of you will have experienced loss. To you, I extend my sympathies.

In that context, it is particularly lovely to see you all here today, surrounded by your family and friends. Zoom and the other online tools we've used to stay connected during the pandemic have been a lifeline. But celebrating together makes for a much more joyous event, don't you think?

After today, some of you may continue your studies in an academic setting, but for a number — perhaps many of you — this marks the end of your academic endeavors, at least for now. It doesn't though, mark the end of your education.

The tools you have acquired and honed here at Carleton — learning how to analyze and synthesize information, to meet deadlines and juggle multiple assignments — these will now help you navigate in a different arena.

You are going to be looking for and finding jobs, joining workplaces where you will need to learn an organization's language and culture, as well as how to work within it. You will learn

how to perform a particular job, and move from it to others as you climb corporate ladders or make course corrections in your careers.

You will have to learn how to work under bad bosses. In every career, unfortunately, there are bad bosses. I hope you encounter few of them, and that your tenure under them is brief. Keep in mind when this happens that there are great bosses ahead. And if you become a manager, be the latter, not the former.

You will need to learn how to find the right balance between work and all the other parts of your world — your relationships, your family, your mental and physical health.

This balancing of work and life outside work is one of the most crucial skills you will need to acquire in this next phase of your journey, and it's a difficult one to achieve. With constant connectivity, there is so much pressure to erase the lines between work time and your time.

Protect your personal time, your family time, the time you devote to the non-work endeavors that feed your soul and replenish your energy.

But I would also urge you to work hard. Because hard work leads to good work and work that is rewarding. I'm talking here about psychological rewards, not financial ones. Though hard work can deliver those as well.

We spend a lot of our lives working and I would urge you to find work that fulfills you. That can be easier said than done at the beginning of a working career, which your resume is short and your expertise is still being developed.

But lean into areas that interest you and explore them with gusto. Bring curiosity to your work. Keep an open mind. Be a good colleague. Be an eager mentee, and when it's your turn, a supportive mentor. Give back.

I know you are not all journalism and communications students. But I beg the indulgence of those of you who are not because I would like to address my people for a minute or two.

Journalism has been going through a rocky period. Jobs can be hard to find and especially at the entry level, salaries aren't great. That aside, it's just the best job. If I counted the days I was bored at work on my fingers and toes, I would still have digits to spare.

I wish you good fortune as you try to find entry into our field. And I beseech you to comport yourself with integrity.

We live in a highly polarized world right now, made the more so by news outlets that profit off of fomenting anger and dissent. This type of journalism is eroding the foundation of democracy

and rending the fabric of our communities. It is more theater than journalism. Don't use your skills that way.

As you embark on your careers, understand that you will make mistakes. We all do. Every journalist I respect hates making errors.

The trick is not to get defensive when you do. Acknowledge the mistake, fix it as fast as you can, and thank the person who pointed it out to you — even if their tone was snarky when they did it. The reality is they have done you a favor.

Some of you probably have plans in place — jobs or at least internships that are waiting for you and a road map for your immediate future. I wish you well in those endeavors.

But I suspect some of you are feeling today the way I did, back decades ago when I got my single degree, a Bachelor of Arts in English literature.

Truth be told, I don't recall much from my own graduation day. I don't remember who gave the convocation address and I don't remember the pearls of wisdom he presented to me and my friends. It was 1978, so I'm pretty sure it was a he.

What I do remember from that time is a swirl of emotions. Sadness, because I knew my friends and I would not be together as much going forward.

There was also a sense of readiness. I was ready to finish school. But mostly there was anxiety, because I had no clue what I wanted to do with my life.

I struggled for a bit. But I eventually stumbled into journalism by complete serendipity, and I consider myself profoundly fortunate to have done so. It has been for me a highly fulfilling and rewarding career.

The period of transition you're embarking on may be challenging but you will find a way — your way. I only hope for you that you get as much from that journey as I have gotten from mine.

Class of 2022, go forth and prosper.