

Follow your passions – Ian Brown

Internationally recognized author and broadcaster Ian Brown, host of CBC's award-winning radio news and current affairs program *Sunday Morning*, gave the Commencement address at UNB on September 3. Here is the text of that address:

Ladies and gentlemen, it's a great honor to be here today, at the Commencement Ceremony of one of Canada's oldest universities, and to give it first commencement address at that. But it's also a daunting honor, because like most people asked to give commencement addresses, I suspect, I can't understand why they asked me. I can't imagine that I have anything to say that remotely measures up to the importance of this occasion. So I stand before you feeling like a fraud, despite the Batman outfit of the academic gown. Fortunately, having spent my adult life trying to make a living as a writer and journalist, feeling like a fraud is quite a common experience for me.

However, I do bring with me one very literary and journalistic trait that I think will stand me in good stead. I am, like all writers and journalists, consumed with envy. Envy of all of you. Envy, because you are about to experience four years of freedom — more freedom than you have had to date, and more freedom than you will likely ever have again. For the foreseeable future, you are free to read whatever you like, think whatever you like, and write whatever you like — and you're probably free to smoke as well. You're free to contradict yourself. In fact, this institution, dedicated as it is to producing first-class minds, will encourage you to hold as many contradictory ideas in your minds at once as you can manage without having a nervous breakdown — which is, after all, one definition of a first-class mind.

You are now in a place — or a space, if you prefer that noun — where your mind can and should do as it pleases. Where you can pursue your own pleasure — what you feel is important, rather than what's supposed to be important. I envy you that freedom more than I can say.

I also envy you because you have me to tell you all this. I didn't even have me

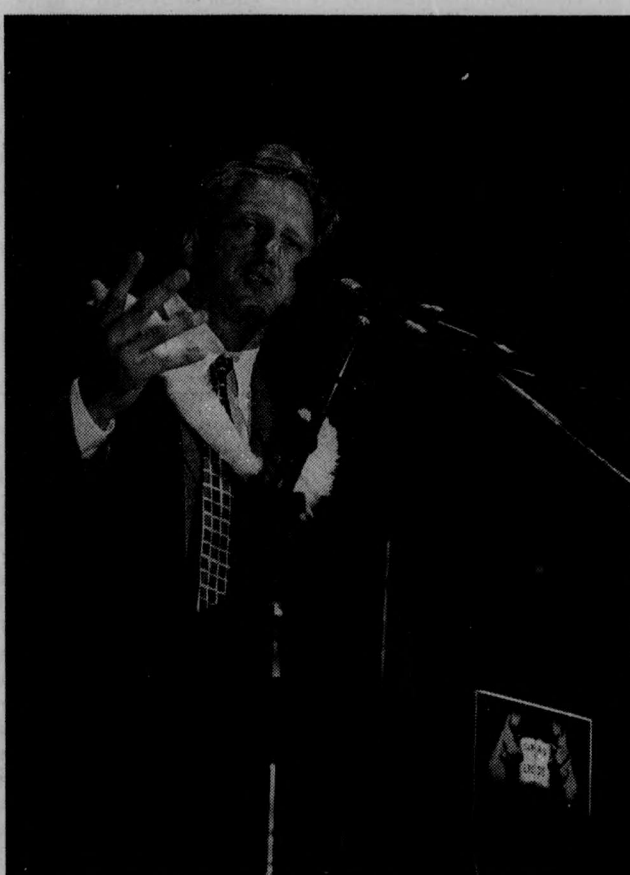
around to clear things up. The only address of this sort I can remember hearing when I enrolled at the University of Toronto was a speech delivered, for reasons I can't even begin to imagine, by a man I believe was the Swedish Consul-General in Toronto. I don't know why he was chosen. Certainly nothing he said stuck with me. Although I did have the vague impression that my years as a university student would be graced with visits by many highly attractive, adventuresome, blond Swedish women. This in fact never happened. Not even once.

Anyway, you're stuck with envious, fraudulent, distinctly non-Swedish me. You are all sitting here on the brink of a new year, possibly nursing a hangover, wondering what the hell you're going to do for the rest of your life.

My advice to you is very simple: follow your heart.

Pursue intellectually what interests you, what gives you pleasure, what seizes your hackle of passion. Do this while you have the chance. Pursue what you love, what you really love in your heart of hearts, whether or not it's something you're supposed to pay attention to. Find your passion, and study it, hard, with discipline and commitment.

This is a place where you should leave most duties and obligations behind. Here is where you should ignore the career advice of your Mum and Dad behind, where you should ignore the advice of your pals who want a companion in their classes or your lovers who want you near at hand. The only responsibility you have here is to study what gives you pleasure. And I mean real pleasure, of the intellectual variety. I presume you can handle



physical pleasure without any advice from me. But the intellectual pleasure I am talking about is nonetheless very satisfying, almost sexual in its intensity.

By now, of course, I know what you're thinking. You're thinking: not only is this guy not Swedish, and nuts, he's also stating the obvious.

I wish you were right. But I speak to a lot of students in the course of my work, and I always say the same thing — that you should follow your passion. And afterwards students always come up and say the same thing: no one ever said that to us in four years.

That's tragic. But it's predictable, too. We live, after all, in what I call the incurable age: the age of incurable deficits, incurable diseases, incurable social problems. We are told our only recourse is to tighten our belts and make do with less. This is, of course, just an economic answer to an economic problem, but it has a way of pervading the entire society as an ethic, a way of infecting everything. Passion is considered extravagant these days; pursuing what really interests you is deemed self-indulgent. Look at New Brunswick: from what I read in the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's national newspaper, just about the only future anyone here in New Brunswick has is as a telephone operator. And the government's thrilled with the fact. Because we have to make do with less, right? On top of that we live in a world overrun with would-be experts who pretend to have answers they can't

possible possess; in a world deluged with information that tells no coherent story. The result is everywhere around us: people anxious about the future, demoralized by obligations, afraid of their extravagant passions, but desperate for connection and energy.

We in the media are no help, either. Too often we think, or don't think, to be more precise, with one voice. We tell people not what we really find fascinating, but what we think we're supposed to tell you. We're the most hidebound profession on earth.

I well remember the first time I realized this. I have been asked by my employer of the time, the *Globe and Mail*, to go to Ottawa to write a story about the role of the Senate. After three weeks in the *Globe's* library, I had to conclude the Senate didn't have a specific role, or at least that no one knew what it was. So I went to Ottawa, and watched the Senate in action, where I arrived at the conclusion that the Senate was some kind of holding tank for old people. That was the only unequivocally true thing I knew. In the course of my stay, a famous Senator explained the entire Canadian constitution to me off the top of his head while relieving himself in the men's room of the Parliamentary dining room. This struck me as amazing: here was a man who could think and do his business at the same time. Not me: when I'm doing one, I can't do the other. But not this guy. And as he spoke, I realized I was watching one of the great confidence tricks of the male Canadian political establishment — because of course, the fact that he had genitals was irrelevant: what mattered was what was in his head. This, I thought to myself, is the thing about Canadian politics: it has a brain, but it doesn't have genitals. It has a head, but no body. It's a set of abstract ideas, which is not the way most Canadians experience the country at all.

I said this in my story. My reward was to be accosted by Richard Doyle, who had recently been made a senator, but who for years before had been the editor of the *Globe*. "Hated your Senate story," he said. Oh, I said, why? "Because all that stuff was personal; it wasn't about politics." Oh I said? Don't you think behavior speaks to character, and that character speaks to the nature of the legislation that rules us? Don't you think it's possible, as Napoleon said, that it's

personalities and not principles that rule an age? Whereupon senator Doyle never spoke to me again, and I knew I must have hit a nerve. This is what happens when you stay true to what you really notice, as opposed to parroting back all the stuff you're supposed to notice, that everyone pretends is the proper stuff of study.

Your job, as new university students, is to stay true to what you truly notice, to what truly grabs you. You have to get out from under the depressing orthodoxies of our time, the crushing pressure of the make-do-with-less doctrine, that says individualism is indulgence. Your job is to pursue what you really love, to the point where you know it well enough to test it, to tell the truth about it, to expose its myths. That is the way to free yourself. You have to indulge your whims. You have to let yourself be interested by the things that interest you. You have to be true to yourself, however unacceptable you may consider that self to be. You have to find a discipline that lets you investigate your passions. This simple but radical cause is your job. And I mean really radical, not in the useless sense of radically right or radically left, but radical because it frees you from orthodoxy. That is the real freedom I am talking about, the real subversion you have to undertake.

It's hard to do. Hemingway said the hardest thing he had to learn as a writer was to figure out what he truly felt and thought at any given moment in time — as opposed to what he thought he was supposed to think and feel, what others wanted him to think and feel, what it was acceptable and proper to think and feel. It's hard to tell the truth, the embarrassing,



GRECO

Pizza On Time... Or Pizza On Us!...

Great Campus Special

Medium Pan

2 Items

GRECO \$8.99 GRECO

plus taxes

Add a Loonie

for 8" Garlic Fingers with sauce
or stuffed crust

Only Greco Guarantees

FREE DELIVERY

In 30 minutes or FREE FOOD*

*After 5.00p.m. conditions permitting

Greco Student Number **454-3030**

We also deliver Free*

Donairs, Oven Subs
Garlic Fingers, Chicken Wings
Mozza Sticks * Minimum Order \$8.00
* Except other specials

Percy's Hair Design - Esthetics

Studio and Tanning Salon

129 King St.

For Appointment: Call or drop by
129 King St. - 458-1336

Student Special
Sept/Oct

*Guys and Gals
Two for One: You pay
and bring a friend free
or split the cost*

Percy's 458-1336



MOOSEHEAD DRY DELIVERS

BREWED LONGER
FOR A BOLD UPFRONT TASTE
WITH NO AFTERTASTE,
MOOSEHEAD DRY DELIVERS.

5.5% ALC./VOL.

CAMPUS REP.: CORY HARTLEN - MACKENZIE HALL

To learn more about Moosehead, visit our website at <http://www.moosehead.ca>.