

**UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH
CONVOCATION ADDRESS
Given 24th February 2011
QUENTIN JOHNSON**

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, and President, Dr Alastair Summerlee; Faculty Members; Graduating Students; Honoured Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen, I am deeply honoured on two counts: the first, to have been awarded a degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, and the second, to have been invited to give the convocation address this afternoon. Before proceeding, I would like to thank Dr Richard Reid at the University of Guelph, who without my knowledge, nominated me for this prestigious award.

I was born in India and educated in the UK. After graduating from Cheltenham College in Gloucestershire, I attended the University of Keele in North Staffordshire. I can never claim to have been a model undergraduate student as one of my own invited guests present here today can confirm. In fact, I wonder how my former lecturers and professors would have reacted to this news: most likely by laughing their heads off.



(left to right) Dr. Alastair Summerlee, President and Vice Chancellor; Quentin; Pamela Wallin, Chancellor; and Dr. Richard Reid

After graduating, I went into the UK food industry, working for Weston Research Laboratories, a member company of Associated British Foods. ABF does have a Canadian connection in that the company was and is still owned by the Weston family of Toronto. I also met my beautiful wife in the UK, in London. She was originally English but had been raised in Calgary and then went back to the UK. After we married, we came to Canada in 1976. I held a succession of positions in the milling and baking industry in Canada, but after being downsized twice, I decided, in 1992, to employ myself.

In 1997 I became tired of helping companies develop the latest in doughnuts and other baked goodies. I was wishing that there could be something more worthwhile to do and wondering whether I could find such work. I am the classic case of "Be careful of what you wish for; you might just get it!"

As a result of a single phone call out of the blue, since 1997, I have been helping countries improve the quality of their people's diets through the fortification of staple foods by adding vitamin and mineral micronutrients. Micronutrient fortification and supplementation of staple foods have been shown to be among the most cost-effective interventions that can improve people's lives. Do not take my word for it: you can see the information yourselves on the Copenhagen Consensus website. The Consensus is a panel of at least 8 Nobel Laureates who assess the cost effectiveness of activities by examining proposal papers that would address 10 of the most pressing problems the world faces today. Among these are food security, climate change, and terrorism. On my first trip, I spent 2 weeks in Bangladesh, and on the second, I was in Africa for about 6 weeks. The first 3 weeks in Africa were spent visiting refugee camps in Kenya and Uganda; the final 3 were spent in Malawi and Zambia. I will never forget those first 3 weeks, because they are forever imprinted on my mind. I received a strong message then that I still believe today: this is important work, and I can contribute to improving the lot of people in a permanent way. I became enthusiastic and passionate about the work that I do.

I have worked with various UN agencies: UNICEF, WFP, WHO, the development banks, CIDA, the Micronutrient Initiative, the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition, Helen Keller International, and World Vision Canada. My country tally now stands at 81 in 13.5 years of work. I have experienced the extremes of climate:

plus 50 degrees in Pakistan and, more recently, minus 35 degrees in Mongolia. I have also had exposure to the traditions, religions, and customs of people in 81 countries around the world; I have seen all sorts of conditions of woman- and mankind; and I have learned that my solution to a particular problem may not be the right one!

Consequently, I have learned lessons that I would like to share with you this afternoon.

First, don't expect that the field you have studied at university will necessarily end up providing you with a life-long career. I know someone who got her MMus before she changed her mind and eventually became a doctor! Isabel Bayrakdarian, the Canadian opera singer, started out with a degree in Engineering Science!

In my case, I had no clue what I was going to do: I became a cereals chemist because I didn't want to follow in my father's footsteps by going into Geology. I quickly found that working in the milling and baking business, you are always learning something new and I learned to have an enquiring mind. Maybe that inquisitiveness developed into my discipline for life-long learning. The day I think I know it all will be the day I am in trouble. So that would be my second point: stay inquisitive, be open-minded, and keep learning.

Third, maintain a balance in life. In addition to continuing to learn throughout your life, take time to look after your physical, mental, and spiritual self.

I think our children, Sophie and Will, present here today, have achieved this. Will works in database management (which is a field in which you have to keep learning); he teaches rock climbing, which keeps him fit; and he sings for pleasure in the Tafelmusik Chamber Choir. Sophie, our daughter, works full time at Concordia University in Montreal, and spends her spare time reading voraciously and keeping fit running and gardening. I have found that making sure I look after myself in these three ways has helped to deal with the challenges of international travel, time differences, different cultures, and different foods.

We all know the importance of keeping fit. If you can't play a sport, then walk or cycle to work. If you can't do that, join a gym. Whatever it is, keep your body active.

It is easy to pay attention to looking after the body and mind, but sometimes we neglect to feed the spirit as well. A Pakistani taxi driver once asked me, "Do you have a faith?" Since I was in a Muslim country, I was understandably a bit concerned about where this conversation was going to go! I replied, "Yes, I have a faith. I am Christian." He replied quite simply, "Good. Everybody must have a faith."

Now, you might not have a formal faith, and that's okay. But I hope you will always try to be ethical and fair in your dealings with people. I hope that whatever you do ends up making the world a better place or makes people feel better. It's been medically proven that it will make you feel better too!

Fourth, it is important that we keep the fine art of face-to-face conversation. To see one another's facial expressions and body language is just as important as speaking and listening. A kind word and a smile are free, and they open many doors. It is important to remember that at least 75% of the world's population does not have easy access to the Internet: e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, or Google. You cannot replace body language communication with emoticons and one-line comments sent into the ether!

Finally, do what you love, and the career and lifestyle you want will find you. I have had a number of career changes and job changes, and it was not until 20 years after I left university that I found I was doing something I really felt passionate and enthusiastic about. Looking back, I realize that all the previous positions I'd held were, in fact, the building blocks that have allowed me to do what I am doing today.

In conclusion, I cannot end my address without recognizing the enormous contribution and support I have received from my family: my wife, Susan, and our children, Sophie and Will. Susan has put up with the absences and with my travels to unsafe and risky places. Without her support, thoughts, and prayers, none of this would ever have been possible.

A quotation from the Book of Micah the prophet was used on the t-shirts of a CIDA-funded World Vision Canada project in Malawi, and I would like to leave you with a modified version of it:

"Be kind, be just, and may your God go with you."

Thank you very much.