

A Life of Service and Purpose

Richard Hoshino, Quest University Canada
Commencement Speech, April 2016

Good morning.

It is the late spring of 1979, a hot, sticky Saturday afternoon. Hundreds of us sit together, side by side, in rows of wooden folding chairs on the main campus lawn. We wear blue nylon robes. We listen impatiently to long speeches. When the ceremony is over, we throw our caps in the air, and we are officially graduated from college, the senior class of Brandeis University in the city of Waltham, Massachusetts.

Afterward, I find Morrie Schwartz, my favorite professor, and introduce him to my parents. He is a small man who takes small steps, as if a strong wind could, at any time, whisk him up into the clouds. Although his teeth are crooked and his lower ones are slanted back, when he smiles it's as if you'd just told him the first joke on earth.

He tells my parents how I took every class he taught. Before we leave, I hand my professor a present, a tan briefcase with his initials on the front. I bought this the day before at a shopping mall. I didn't want to forget him. Maybe I didn't want him to forget me.

"Mitch, you are one of the good ones," he says, admiring the briefcase. Then he hugs me. I feel his thin arms around my back. I am taller than he is, and when he holds me, I feel awkward, older, as if I were the parent and he were the child.

Morrie asks if I will stay in touch, and without hesitation I say, "Of course."

When he steps back, I see that he is crying.

This is the opening scene of *Tuesdays with Morrie*, the story of Mitch Albom, who at the age of 22 promised to keep in touch with his college mentor, and inevitably did not. Mitch moved to Detroit to chase his ambitions, where he became a world-renowned sportswriter and the recipient of the annual award for best sports columnist in America: not once, but a record 13 times. Despite his fame and fortune, Mitch felt something was missing, and he longed for the peace and contentment that he saw in Morrie Schwartz, the gentle Professor of Sociology from his small liberal arts university.

Serendipitously, Mitch was able to reunite with Morrie nearly two decades later, who by this time was 78 and dying of Lou Gehrig's disease. Every Tuesday, Mitch flew over to Boston, to visit Morrie, where they discussed various issues including community, work, money, forgiveness, family, and death. Reuniting with his old mentor, Mitch realized that he had been chasing the wrong things all these years – possessions, prestige, popularity, and power – rather than seeking the humble life that Morrie had chosen, a life of selfless and sacrificial service.

Mitch turned his lessons from Morrie into this, his Keystone Project. As a testament to how much Morrie's life struck a chord with readers around the world, *Tuesdays with Morrie* has now sold 15 million copies in 50 countries, and has become the bestselling memoir in world history.

While I was profoundly impacted by this book, I confess that Mitch's story made me jealous. Like the majority of the faculty on this stage, and like many of the family and friends in attendance, I didn't have the opportunity to attend a small student-focussed liberal arts and sciences university. Mitch spoke glowingly of his time at Brandeis, and was grateful to have been mentored by a professor who cared so much about him. I couldn't relate at all.

Whether it was a lecture hall of 500 or a seminar class of 15, the majority of my professors treated undergraduate teaching as a chore, as though it were something they had to do, like toilet-cleaning and dishwashing. At least, that's how it felt to me. My undergraduate experience was so impersonal that in four years, I only had two professors who bothered to learn my name.

And of course, neither of them cried at my commencement ceremony.

To the Quest University Canada Class of 2016, your undergraduate years were different, intentionally different, from those of us who attended one of the traditional degree-producing factories that represent the majority of today's post-secondary institutions.

We, as your tutors, sought to become an essential part of your education, as we realized that we had the opportunity and the privilege to shape your lives. What we attempted to do, imperfectly of course, was model a life of service, a life centered not on our own career advancement, but a much richer life focussed on impacting and equipping each of you through our life experiences, so that you could then go on to impact society, and equip those that you'll influence over the course of your lives.

We did this, not by covering the material for you, but by helping you uncover the material, for yourselves, so that you could sharpen your communication skills, deepen your critical thinking skills, perform close readings, conduct critical analyses, and discover how the theories and concepts from the classroom were directly applicable to the issues that you cared about.

This is why we spent months designing our courses, from scratch, courses that represented the culmination of everything the forty of us have learned, through the 100+ university degrees we have obtained, and through the nearly 1000 research papers that we have published collectively. This is why we invested this time and energy, for you, because we refused to treat you as a customer in search of a degree, but rather, as a young woman or man, with great potential, in search of an education that would prepare you for the 21st century.

And sometimes we realized that your learning would best happen outside the classroom – which was why you had opportunities to study ecology and zoology at the Bamfield Marine Sciences Centre, or learn Canadian politics as you canvassed for the candidate of your choice in the most recent federal election.

The tutors behind me, who are by far the most talented and visionary educators I've ever met, worked tirelessly to give you the education you received, not just in the classroom, but also in the lab, in the field, and in the recording studio – as well as in “classrooms” a bit farther away, in places like Antarctica, Belize, and South Africa.

We, your tutors, chose this life of service because we decided that you were worth investing in. We still feel this way.

This is why we gave you so much of ourselves, and dedicated such a large percentage of our waking hours to your development, treating you as a person worthy of dignity, worthy of our very best. This is why we pushed you: in your courses, in your independent studies, and especially over the past two years as you developed, created, and refined your Keystone Projects.

In other words, we didn't teach you molecular biology, food security, feminism, urban infrastructure, Spanish, microeconomics, and spherical trigonometry. What we did was teach you.

Seeing you in your robes today, watching you present your Keystones over the past few days, growing with you and learning with you during your time here, we are confident, despite our many flaws, that we served you well. Your decision to choose Quest, and entrust us to educate you, added so much meaning and purpose to our lives.

My favourite quote in *Tuesdays with Morrie* appears a third of the way into the book, when Morrie says this to Mitch:

So many people walk around with a meaningless life. They seem half-asleep, even when they're busy doing things they think are important. This is because they're chasing the wrong things. The way you get meaning into your life is to devote yourself to loving others, devote yourself to your community around you, and devote yourself to creating something that gives you purpose.

There are many definitions of “purpose”. Here's my favourite: Purpose is the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves.

I love that. Purpose is the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves.

In other words, every single employee of this university, from our custodial staff to the folks in Tech Support, from our librarians to our varsity coaches in soccer and basketball, from our admissions counsellors to our clinical counsellors – every single Quest employee does what they do in the service of something larger than themselves.

Having worked with so many of you, I know that as your time at Quest comes to a close, that you've developed this yearning too: as your lives were filled with purpose, you found a sense of meaning which went beyond meeting your own needs, which enabled you to serve, thus giving knowledge and opportunity and hope to others.

Like you, Renee. You researched and designed an info-graphic about GMO foods so that Quest students could make more informed choices in the cafeteria and the grocery store.

Like you, Jonathan. You built a self-circulating pond on our campus, and prompted the development of a new application procedure whereby students can apply to do on-campus projects related to their Questions.

Like you, Katie. You developed and led an ambitious public education and outreach program for adults and children in Porteau Cove.

Like you, JB. You developed an employment assessment for the Street-to-Home Foundation that will go a long way toward figuring out how to solve the housing crisis afflicting those living in the Downtown Vancouver Eastside, and help their residents secure stable employment.

Like you, Kyle. You volunteered to help feed children through the Garibaldi Highlands Elementary School Hot Breakfast Program, and participated in campus events to help raise funds for the Howe Sound Women's shelter, the Rotary campaign to end polio, and the Canadian Cancer Society's Relay for Life.

Like you, Aida. You and Khoya designed and implemented a Roommate Matching Algorithm during your first year. And now in your last year, as the President of the SRC, you realized that Quest absolutely needed to host a conference on Power, Race, and Privilege, and you made it happen.

Like you, Roz. During your time on campus, you were Rosalind, a studious academic who thrived especially in your physics and neuroscience courses; off-campus, you became Roz G with the red lipstick, blasting fourteen feet up in the Women's Ski Superpipe and setting the world record at the X-Games. With your involvement in Right to Play, your passion for mentoring young girls who dream of following in your footsteps, and your perseverance as you completed this eight-year journey despite everything you went through, you are an Olympian in every way and you are an inspiration to the 35 million of us who call ourselves Canadian.

As I only have a few more minutes, I won't share the other 90 stories that I could.

You, the Class of 2016, have acquired purpose through this unique experience, especially for those of you that put your Question, not yourselves, at the centre of your education. We hope that as you reflect on your years in Squamish, you'll cherish these two gifts, a life of purpose and a life of service, as the core takeaways of your Quest education: that as you found your voice, you inspired others to find their voices.

This, of course, is true not just for students who pursued "applied" projects in the community, but also for those of you whose Questions focussed on the advancement of "pure" knowledge: in the Humanities, in the Sciences, and in Mathematics – like Nicki, who learned Combinatorial Game Theory all by herself while she was on exchange in Amsterdam, and for her Keystone created an Artificial Intelligence to play a complicated multi-dimensional game that can beat any human player. Believe me, I tried.

In other words, Quest isn't just the intense academically-rigorous university that graduates the most active and passionate students, and comes #1 every year in the National Survey of Student Engagement. Your education has shaped you for something much more.

You have become knowledgeable and resilient alumni with the potential to make a significant impact in your communities, and now you are ready to seize this next chapter in your lives.

As you continue living this life of purpose, you will feel freedom and gratitude, rather than bitterness and cynicism, despite the adversities of life – rejection, unappreciation, grief, heartbreak – that will inevitably come your way.

And as you continue living this life of service, you will feel joy and meaning, rather than pride and entitlement, in spite of any successes that will come your way.

I know that this is true thanks to my involvement in this community.

Four years ago, I landed my dream job, to join the Quest faculty. I am deeply grateful for this life that I have in Squamish, a life filled with purpose, a life dedicated to the service of people that matter. As hard as this job is, I feel the blessings of this life – especially on this day, as we honour and celebrate your commencement, the start of your life post-Quest.

On behalf of the faculty, it has been a privilege to serve you, and see you mature into the women and men you have become. We wish you the very best in all the years ahead.

I want to especially thank my mentees: Nicki, Adam, and Michelle. It has been the biggest joy of my professional life to have been your mentor during your time at Quest.

All I've ever wanted in my life, ever since I was a teenager, was to someday become a teacher, with the hope that one day I'd be able to fulfill the best quote on education that I've ever seen:

True teachers are those who use themselves as bridges over which they invite their students to cross; then, having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse, encouraging them to create bridges of their own.

You've done that. What more could we ask?

I started this speech with the excerpt of Morrie crying at Mitch's commencement ceremony, and the emotion he felt as he said goodbye. I told you I couldn't relate because of my own undergraduate experience, which was so impersonal, which ended with my commencement fifteen years ago.

But now, being here at Quest with all of you, I get it. I finally get it. I see what an undergraduate education can be, and how this way of education transforms lives – not just yours, but ours as well.

To the Quest University Canada Class of 2016, we salute you.

May you go on and pursue opportunities that are rich in meaning, and discover creative ways to live a life of service and purpose.

May you go on and use the voice that you've found here so that you can help others find their voices too.

And may you go on and apply everything you've acquired here, to bring joy and hope to others, and humbly journey alongside them, as you inspire them to be the change they wish to see in this world.

Thank you and congratulations.