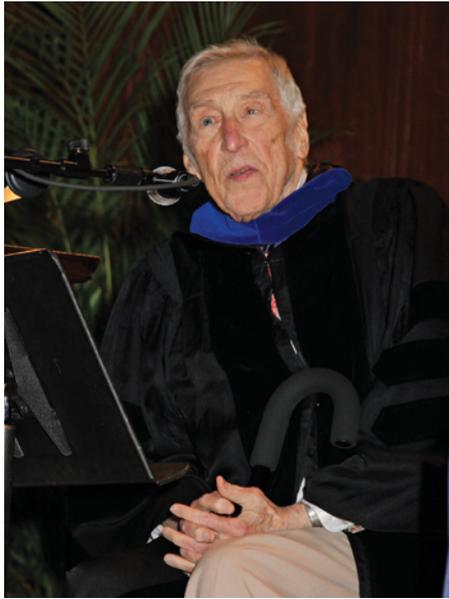


Recognizing Life's Rewards

Composer, musician, author, and entrepreneur Gunther Schuller was the May 2013 Commencement speaker.

Some of you, or perhaps most of you, may have heard of me—you heard something about me a few minutes ago—and about the rather wonderful, happy, rich, successful life and career I have had in the world of music. I say this not in any sense of boasting. On the contrary, I say it in all humility. For I have been *so* fortunate . . . so many things, so many people, so many events and circumstances contributed to the successfulness of my life and career. Indeed, a lot of it was



Scott Christenson

sheer luck. I'm sure you've heard that one before, the thing about luck. Any truly honest person when asked about his or her achievements, regardless of what field of endeavor, will tell you that a lot of it has been about luck. But it is, of course, also about talent, hard work, persistence, learning and *continuing* to learn, to acquire even greater knowledge and experience.

I don't intend to preach at you, to tell you what you should do and how to do it. Nor will I advise you how to become rich and famous and successful. I won't talk about that at all, because that's not what life is all about. By the way, if I *had* a sure-fire formula for how to become rich and famous and successful—and, of course, I don't, and I don't think anybody has such a formula, but if I had one, then I would probably have bottled it and patented it and then I *would* probably have become rich and famous. Anyway, no, that's not what life is about.

Life has much greater rewards than wealth and fame. They are subtler, more inner-directed, inner-felt. They're not as obvious and they are not so materialistically inclined. But those rewards usually don't come that quickly; they take longer to acquire and to appreciate. So what I want to do now is to talk about what I have learned in my long fruitful life and about the values I espouse and about the benefits and pleasures thereof. Some of what I learned took me a long, long time to learn. You do get wiser with age; not necessarily smarter, but wiser. I am now going

on 88, and I know a lot of things *now* that it took me some considerable time to learn. I would like to share those thoughts and feelings with you.

Yes, I was very talented and ambitious and energetic and smart; and sometimes I thought I knew it all. Maybe I even thought I was "the best." But what I really, really, *really* learned was that the more I learned and the more I knew, the more I knew how little I really knew, and how much more there was to know and to learn. That will happen to you, too. And that's why I implied earlier that it is a wonderful thing to be prepared, nay to be eager, to continue learning. Not

only in the sense of formal education as you've had here at this university, but in the sense of always reaching and pushing forward within your field, while *also* branching out into wider fields, probably related to your primary activity. I learned very soon in my youth how enriching and fascinating that could be.

I just used the word "enriching," and earlier I used to word "rich" when I mentioned what a wonderful, happy, "rich" successful life I have had. I didn't mean rich in any monetary or financial sense, I meant rich in the sense of content, of substance, of significance, of depth of experience. We human beings are very special, arguably unique, in the animal kingdom. We have highly developed brains with which we can count, which means we can count money—and in this commercial, capitalist society, we have many people who do that a lot, and some do it really very well, while others don't seem to get it right. In any case, we special human beings also can create, and much more than just procreate—producing offspring—we can invent. We can imagine new, never before seen things. We can envision. It is those capacities that give real meaning to our existence, to our lives.

When we want to measure the ultimate accomplishments of our long human history, of our collective civilizations from the beginnings of time to now, we measure all that by what we have cumulatively created, invented, and brought into being. We don't measure it by wealth,

because sheer wealth is ephemeral, elusive, transitory—at times dangerous. Art, invention, creation, discovery, all these are eternal. Everything I ever did—and I do mean everything—was never done with money in mind, with money as the primary motivation. It was done for the innate love of the thing, for the absolute need to do it, money or not, whether that was composing or conducting or playing the French horn, teaching, publishing music, producing recordings, writing books, and so on. Of course, I didn't turn down money when it was involved, when it was offered. But that was like a bonus, a dividend. It wasn't what made me do it.

Now I realize, I'm probably a freak of this society, a capitalist society, and I don't suppose that this can be or ought to be everyone's way of life. But it was so with me; and it was (and still is) an exhilarating and very happy experience, *and* very successful.

In the end I actually became quite wealthy, in a modest sort of way. And I believed that wealth and money were to be used to do good deeds. To help others and to share my wealth and my good fortune with my fellow human beings. The acquisition of more wealth for wealth's sake was an anathema to me. And as a consequence, over a period of many years I gave away several millions of dollars, mostly by publishing young unknown composer's music, giving them in effect their first publication and many further publications, or by producing recordings for my record company, which gave performers and composers *their* first recordings. I did all of this at my own personal expense, never taking any salary, and in fact mostly losing all that money. But as long as I had it, I didn't mind losing it, spending it well. Those recordings and publishings were never intended to make money. I did what money is for: to spend it well, to give something back, to do something valuable with it.

Thus I learned that giving, that sharing, is wonderful and very gratifying, that giving is better than taking, or only taking. From which I learned that a good part of life is ultimately all about "us," "we" and not about "me." I hope that we will in the future in this society have more about "we" and less about "me!"

Furthermore, as I learned about this concept of sharing and giving, I also learned more and more about respect, respect for others, even for others with whom I disagreed, or where I believed in another alternative. I learned that

it is not necessary to hate someone just because one disagrees with that someone. And then I also learned more and more to listen. Not only to talk, but to listen—a lot. Listening goes with learning; and I learned that one can learn a lot by listening, to both good and bad; to both right and wrong. A corollary to that thought is the fact that I learned as much—or perhaps even more—from the mistakes and failures I made—and there were plenty of those early on—than I did from my correct decisions and successes.

I gradually also learned that integrity, as much as possible—that is, inherent integrity with the minimum of compromise—that this is a necessity in a truly fulfilled life. By integrity I mean moral, artistic, and professional integrity. I think integrity is an intrinsic part of our human DNA. But it is also vulnerable and corruptible, and the temptations of expediency and of the marketplace are around us all the time. I soon learned that it takes a good dose of moral discipline to fight off, to resist the temptation to compromise.

I just used the word *discipline*, and I know that in many circles and in some of our youth discipline is a kind of dirty word. "Having fun" is a much more applauded concept. Well, I learned, fortunately sooner rather than later, that discipline and having fun are not incompatible. They can live together in us; discipline can even be fun. It has its own very special rewards.

Humility, humbleness, is another value I learned to cherish. It was not something I actually had to acquire, to learn about. I seemed always, even as a young teenager, to have a sense of humbleness. And I mean this "humbleness" not as some kind of phony modesty, but as an article of faith, a belief, a firm recognition of how small—as wonderful and unique as each of us is—how infinitesimal, how almost insignificant we are in the grand, global, and historic scheme of things. It's a good thing to try to keep this in mind all the time. In my case, as talented as I seem to have been, it kept me pretty humble. Especially when I learned and saw what Beethoven and Mozart and Stravinsky had accomplished. What Shakespeare and Emerson and Emily Dickinson; what Rembrandt and Titian and Picasso had accomplished; what Galileo and Leonardo da Vinci and Darwin had achieved. It kind of keeps things in perspective for you.

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Speaking of perspective and then thinking about our place in society as artists and creators, it is imperative that, as you now go out into that big bad world to make your mark, you commit yourself to staying involved with that society. That you engage with it in the hope that you may contribute something meaningful to it. It goes to what I said earlier about learning and giving and sharing. Selfishness is *not* an option.

By the way, we live in a society where arts and culture are not prized as much as commerce, celebrity, and extreme acquisitions of wealth. What *this means* is that as artists—just even to survive, but also to engage—we need to be adaptable and flexible; we need to take some risks in our lives. We have to be brave and courageous, and if necessary provocative.

It goes without saying—I’m going to say it anyway—that these are especially difficult, complex and confused times. We are such a fragmented, fractious, and polarized society. So we must now help to bring things back together, to help heal the many wounds that have been sustained.

We have in recent decades, along with our various societal ailments and afflictions, become too conformist, too complacent; where individualism and independence of thought in the sense of a democracy are in serious undersupply. A social consciousness is now needed more than ever before.

In closing, I want to become a little more specific as concerns you as artists, as a kind of artistic intelligentsia of the future. You are just about to graduate from a many-year long process of education and learning. You have now survived that process (I assume), and I hope (and assume) it was relatively happy and fulfilling. I stand before you as a high school dropout, as someone who is self-taught and self-made. (By the way this is basically no longer possible and certainly not recommendable in

our degree- and diploma-conscious academic world.) But I learned a great deal from both my self-education and my involvement years later as an educator, as a professor at various universities, as President of the New England Conservatory of Music for 10 years, and as Artistic Director of the Tanglewood Music Center for 22 years. I have also been a keen observer of education in general in this country and an avid analyzer of curricula in educational programs. What I learned from all that is that a six-year education program—let’s say, undergraduate and graduate—and even with degrees beyond that, no matter how good or comprehensive, no matter how wide-ranging those curricula may be, they will not—because they cannot—provide you with everything you should know, you *need* to know, you might want to know and learn. No curriculum, even the best (if there is such a thing), can provide all there is to know and to learn. So much more has to be done on one’s own, and must continue to be done. Formal education and training is just the beginning, a wonderful and hopefully inspiring beginning; a kind of huge blueprint, which has to be continually expanded and elaborated upon. And that is a wonderful thing. One way that I like to describe a good rich life is as a gigantic, never ending learning curve.

I hope I have offered you some interesting thoughts on which to further contemplate. These thoughts and ideas comprise some of the things I have learned in my long, rich, beautifully fulfilled life.

I will close with one final thought. It is not by me, but by a great lady, a great woman, a great artist, named Gloria Steinem—one of my many true heroes. In a commencement address way back in 1987 she said to a graduating class:

“This is the last period of time that will seem lengthy to you, and too protracted. But from now on time will pass without artificial academic measure.” (I would add that it will go with lightning and frightening speed.) Ms. Steinem then said: “Time will go by like the wind, and then time is suddenly gone.” She was *so* right.

For it turns out that life *is* very, very short. I didn’t know that earlier on. So please don’t ever waste any time. All the best to you, much love and beauty and happiness in your life. *And* much fun!