

University of Manitoba Honorary Degree

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Mies van de Rohe Less is More

Robert M. Ledingham, B.I.D., R.I.D.

President

Robert M. Ledingham, Inc.

Mr. Chancellor, Madame President, distinguished guests, graduands, family members and friends, thank you for inviting me here today to receive an honorary degree.

I am moved by the recognition that this degree implies. I am moved that one of my colleagues was so generous as to recommend me for this honour. And I am most gratified that the University of Manitoba has seen fit to accept that recommendation.

Finally, I am pleased to be in such good company — to be standing here today in a room that is so ripe with promise. I want to begin by offering my most sincere congratulations to you the 2006 graduating class.

Now, as part of today's tribute, I have been invited to share the wisdom of a lifetime. But I have also been advised that in

speeches, as in design, there is no better advice than Mies van de Rohe's famous line: "Less is more." So I will be brief.

I'd like to begin by speaking directly to the parents in the room, because I recognize that this convocation is as important to you as it is to your children. Your sacrifices and encouragement have undoubtedly fuelled their academic success and you are justly proud.

I say that, thinking about how enthusiastically my own father would have greeted this day. He had a doctorate of his own — a Harvard PhD in Science — and he so valued education that, as director of the National Research Council's Prairie Regional Lab in Saskatoon, he attended the University of Saskatchewan convocation for many years.

My father was always supportive, demanding only that, whatever I chose to do, I did it as well as I could. I regret that he died young — too young even to watch me receive my first degree from this university. But I know how he would have applauded that day, and I know that if he were here on this day, he would be nearly as proud as I am.

And now to the graduates, who deserve the lion's share of the credit. Each of you has integrated two critical traits. Firstly, you have acknowledged your intelligence — another contribution from your parents. But secondly, you have demonstrated a capacity to put your intelligence to work.

There is a prevailing cultural bias — west of the mountains — that your admirable work ethic must have been nourished by the prairie soil. There is something about this land that seems to encourage an appetite for honest effort — something about

summers that are hot and unforgiving; something about winters that will kill you if you let down your guard.

Regardless — whether you were hard workers when you arrived at the U of M or you had to learn how to work after your enrollment — you will find that those habits of diligence will serve you as well as or better than the actual information that you have gleaned during your studies.

On that count, too, I am disposed to think that you are particularly lucky. In addition to leading my own interior design firm, I also have spent time over the past two decades serving on the board of FIDER — the Federation of Interior Design Education Research. FIDER is the accrediting body for design schools such as this, and as a member of the accreditation committee I have travelled all over Canada and the United States, reviewing the merits of each program. I can say with some authority that the

preparation that design students receive at the U of M stands well against the best schools on the continent.

I must presume that those high standards reflect the good management and academic skills of the entire university and that you are all fortunate to be extremely well prepared. Again I say, congratulations.

Now you must move on. Having scaled this educational pinnacle, you will find yourself dispersed to the base of a fresh new peak. Even the highest achievers among you must now report as the most junior members of a new team. Do not be discouraged.

Observe the opportunities that you will face daily to continue to learn. Call on what you know, work as hard as you can, and the promise that seems so evident here today will be fulfilled. Don't forget the potential of uniting your own strengths with those of your colleagues in other fields. Look to the modern movement of

Green Design as an example. The products of environmental scientists and experts in design working together towards the sustainability of our resources are inspiration indeed.

Let me say a final word about beauty — or about excellence, because they can amount to the same thing.

I read an interesting article in the *New York Times* recently about medical students whose curriculum included a class at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Their teachers were challenging them to look more deeply, to absorb more detail, to observe with a greater degree of refinement. The students were learning to discern between what was good and what was, perhaps, problematic.

Those of you who are graduating in science should do no less. You should observe the crossover between science and art that has arisen, for example, in the works of that famous painter

and code maker, Leonardo da Vinci. Even as a boy, I remember the beauty of tiny living organisms that I frequently discovered under the microscope in my father's laboratory. Watch for that beauty. It's a marker for all that is really excellent in the world.

To the designers — really, to all of you — I also must plead for excellence. You have a chance to make the world a better place — a more functional place, a more beautiful place. Don't waste that chance. Don't settle for "pretty good." Set a high standard and strive for it. Try to make every job better than the last.

You won't always succeed. Some jobs will turn out nearly perfect and, others — well, there have been occasions in my own career when I thought that perfection was actively running away. But I gave my best in the circumstances and, remarkably, those projects sometimes produced the happiest clients.

Above all, today and every day: be proud of yourselves. You have all achieved a worthy goal. You have attained a standard of accomplishment and excellence that the world absolutely needs. Keep it up and we will all come out as winners.

Thank you and good luck.