

Honorary Doctorate

'You learn the most from the hardest things'

Though students are graduating into tough times, a lot of the world has it tougher. As the Globe's Stephanie Nolen gets an honorary doctorate, she hopes grads find inspiration in that

May 22, 2009 03:18 PM EDT

National Newspaper Award and Amnesty International Award for Human Rights Reporting winner Stephanie Nolen is The Globe and Mail's current India, and formerly Africa, correspondent. The author of 28: Stories of AIDS in Africa and two other books, she holds an undergraduate degree in journalism from the University of King's College in Halifax and pursued a masters in development economics from the London School of Economics.



Stephanie Nolen addresses students at the King's 220th Encaenia, at the Cathedral Church of All Saints in Halifax on May 14 as she receives an honorary Doctorate in Civil Laws. Photo: Kerry DeLorey/Calnen Photography

She just received an honorary Doctorate in Civil Laws from King's and this is part of her address to students:

You are graduating today into a world of great uncertainty — my generation, and the ones before mine, have done a spectacular job of really screwing things up. It's deeply unfair, that we are handing you this mess.

But if you will indulge me, I'd like to tell you a little story: On my first day of journalism school at King's, I went to a lecture in the old Haliburton Room, and Michael Cobden, who is here today, and was then the head of the journalism school, mentioned proudly how every single person in that year's graduating class had a job. You will all get jobs, he said with great confidence. And I thought, "Great. A job would be good. A career. A grown-up life."

Four years later, as I sat in this cathedral, I was graduating into the teeth of a bitter recession — and nobody, not one person, in my graduating class had managed to find a full-time job. (Stop me if you've heard this.)

I did the obvious thing: I went to graduate school, and took on \$40,000 worth of additional debt. I went to the London School of Economics, and never regretted a penny of that debt, because I learned a million things, and because I met people and had adventures that continue to open doors for me today. But that was only good for a year of avoiding reality, and not long enough for the recession to end. After submitting my masters thesis, I came back to Canada, to find that now ONE person from my graduating class had a job: He was editing the monthly newsletter of the Atlantic Fish Canning Association. I'm not making this up.

So I left. I made a totally ill-thought-out decision to move to the Middle East, to Jerusalem — to be a freelance journalist in the city which, I soon discovered, already had the world's largest full-time press corps. That, in hindsight, was dumb. And it was really hard. I was broke, I was totally out of my league, I was alone. I was also too proud to come home.

Because I was broke, I lived in a Palestinian village and shopped at a local market and took the local bus and soon I had learned pretty good Arabic. Well, of course, in a couple of years world events were going to dramatically improve the market for journalists who spoke Arabic.

Because I was way out of my league, I landed in Beirut on a holiday just as Israel invaded. I was dumb, but I was also fast on my feet, and two weeks later I was working on a cover story for Newsweek.

Eventually I was able to come back to Canada, and after paying a few newsroom dues, talk my way into a job as a war correspondent, and it all happened much faster than it probably would have, if at all, if I had simply landed the job I originally had hoped for right after graduating from King's. And along the way, I got to tell important stories: I covered the assassination of Israeli prime minister Yitzhak Rabin; I covered the return of the PLO to the occupied Palestinian territories. And I got to race camels in the Egyptian Sinai and dance in a secret underground nightclub in Beirut with the drag queen son of the sheikh who founded Hezbollah.

The point of this story is that, sometimes, bad luck turns out not to be so bad.

That you learn the most from the hardest things.

That opportunities come in places where you're not looking.

And, as Amelia Earhart said (words I later took as my own motto when I was learning to fly), "Courage is the price that life demands for granting peace."

Something else happened to me along the way in those early years of working overseas: I think it began the first time I went to a refugee camp in the Gaza Strip, and really spent some time there. I came away with a whole new understanding of my privilege, as a Canadian, and of the fact that really, I didn't know anything about anything in the world. I didn't know what life was really like for — as I would soon start to realize — the great bulk of people in the world.

And here's something I only started to figure out even later: that even if you spend the rest of your life right here, you are responsible for much of what happens elsewhere in the world.

For how those other people live.

Regardless of what you choose to do with your new degree, your new skills, you will be responsible.

If you have an iPod like mine, or a cellphone, or a Wii, you are connected to the 14-year-olds I have met who are enslaved by rebel groups in the Congo and who dig for coltan, the mineral that is the essential ingredient in our gadgets.

If you have a Gap T-shirt like I do, then you are connected to the Bangladeshi women who stitched it for five bucks a day, and who cannot develop their textile sector into better-paying jobs because of our trade restrictions.

If, like me, you are a Canadian citizen, you are connected to the children in Swaziland who cannot go to school today, who will never have the moment you are having today, because Canada, as a voting, policy-setting member of the World Bank, forces the Swazi government to charge school fees for their primary schools — even though ours are free.

And if, like me, you enjoy the occasional Starbucks latte, you are connected to the women in Ethiopia who earn 70 cents a day sorting their coffee beans. Ah-hah, you think. I always order the fair trade blend. Well, great. The women in the fair trade factory earn 96 cents a day. I know — I spent an afternoon on a Starbucks factory line in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, a couple of years ago.

So I can tell you that those women are glad to have their jobs.

I'm not sure that's good enough.

You are connected to these people. And you decide how much responsibility you will take for that.