

Catherine McAuley Alumnae Award Winner 2018

Dr Melissa Hunfalvay

Acceptance Speech

Good morning and thank you for having me.

About 6-months ago I got a letter from Mr. Walsh, your Principal. When I was in school here, it was not so unusual for me to get a “letter”, albeit of a different kind, from the Principal, in fact, I got quite a few of those.

Such “letters” never came via email though ... and I am really showing my age.

But this letter said I had received the Catherine McAuley Alumnae Award that acknowledged and celebrated great achievements. I was honored, but honestly, I was also a little perplexed.

You see, I am average. I got 64 on my Year 12 Exams. I missed out on my first 4 of 5 University preferences. I barely got into my fifth pick, by a scrapping 0.2 %. I didn't have the best relationship with authority (that goes back to some of those letters from the Principal). I remember being in class, looking at some of my classmates who could sit still and focus and get good grades and I was in ore of them. I got passing grades and I got detention. And even during detention, I couldn't sit still.

When I spoke with Mrs. Wood she said “to accept the award I needed to address the assembly.” I thought, well ok, I don't think I should talk about the time my friends and I got caught ... uh, never mind. I said “no problem. I give scientific talks all the time, let me just talk about my science.”

As the weeks continued though, I have NEVER been so stumped in preparing for a talk as I was for this one. Why was I having so much trouble? It is 8 minutes. No, now it is 6 minutes. But seriously, I have done talks all the time. What was the difference in this one?

So, I did an outline and presented it to Mrs Wood. It went something like this ... how about I just play a rock song and get everyone pumped up. We can do it like a US commencement speech and everyone can shout along and bang heads. Mrs Wood very politely told me my outline, wait, my entire talk, needed to be revised. Poor Mrs Wood.

I went back to being stumped. I mean stumped. I spoke to everyone about it. Work colleagues, my sister, my neighbour, Terri, everyone. Even the hamster I keep in my office at work. His response to my dilemma was to pee in my hand.

Mrs Wood said I needed to talk about me. Was that the issue? I am not so comfortable with that, true. I told Mrs Wood, “Look - I asked my sister, Natalie, to do that so we are covered.”

But it was not just that. The award is for “great achievements” and I believe the achievement is the end of the road. And I don't want to talk to you about the end of the road. I felt that would be disingenuous. The accomplishment is not the entire story.

I also didn't want to suggest that my journey was better than anyone else's. Cause I truly believe it is not. It is simply different.

I want to tell you about the journey it took to get there, or, and I asked Mrs Wood, can't we just go back to head banging?

Mrs Wood held her ground.

And about two weeks ago I had a breakthrough. I was sitting at a really quirky dive of a Greek restaurant in Washington DC where the food is rated 5 stars and the service has no stars. The chef there is very rude and particular. You must call him "Chef". He doesn't not allow straws as he says it "affects the taste of the food." He won't serve tea because the government has not given him the license for a special machine that makes tea the "right way." So he won't make it at all. He doesn't pull his pants up all the way up. It is an overall unpleasant interaction with the chef. But the food he does make is delicious. Exceptional. Cooking food is his passion and talent. So everyone puts up with the Chef to eat the food.

At the same time I was sitting at this restaurant, I was reading a popular book called "*The Subtle Art of not Giving a F#@K*" [insert 4 letter word]. In this book, I read a short paragraph that said this:

People who become exceptional at something, do so NOT because they believe they are exceptional. On the contrary, they become amazing because they are obsessed with improvement. And that comes from a belief that they are, in fact, not that exceptional at all. People that become great at something become great, because they understand that they are not already great. They are average and believe they could be so much better.

Now that sounds more like me.

Let me tell you some of my most gigantic achievements. You ready? You should listen carefully.

1. I lost more tennis matches than I won.
2. I learned more from athletes than what I taught them.
3. I learned that the most talented people don't always win.
4. I learned it is really hard to play tennis from a wheelchair.
5. I learned how to lose all my savings by starting a Health Tech company in 2006.
6. I learned how to lose all my savings by starting a Health Tech company in 2009.

See a theme here? Apparently, I didn't because I started another Health Tech company in 2012.

7. I found that eating 5 cent Raman noodles every day for a year (because that is all I could afford) makes you never want to eat Raman noodles again.
8. I learned that studying to finish my PhD in 3 years rather than the usual 7 means you have no social life. Really no life at all.
9. I learned that to create a scientific breakthrough you may need to sleep in the lab ... all semester.
10. I learned that to achieve something, anything, takes hard work, grit, determination, perseverance. There is no easy road. There is no short cut.
11. I learned that everyone has a path. And everyone's path is unique, and it is for them to navigate.
12. I learned that no one does it alone. No one. Everyone needs a support network.
13. And finally ... I wouldn't change a minute because all of these lessons are part of the journey toward achievements.

Several years ago, after my third attempt and third failure at a Health Tech start up, I was on holidays, and I distinctly remember a day where all I could do was cry. I said to Terri: "All I want is to build a product that one person will get benefit from. Just one person."

When we came home, I began a company called RightEye. The following semester, I put everything into creating something that had the potential to change lives. To change the human condition.

I slept in my lab. I worked weekends. I had my “mad scientist” hair. I met Terri for breakfast on Saturday mornings so I could prove I was alive.

The result: A breakthrough. A way to understand the human condition like never before. A way to build a product to HELP people.

How? It was literally and figuratively EYE OPENING. Using a combination of technology, science and data.

It’s all about the eyes.

The way your eyes move reflects what is happening in your brain. Your eye movements indicate your health.

Melissa then demonstrated how the technology works through a PowerPoint, including photos of family and friends who have helped and influenced her along her journey. Melissa thanked the OLMC community for her award.