

**Speech to the Graduating Class  
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Graduation speeches are a problem. Commencement is a combination of relief, anxiety and celebration – relief that this part of one’s studies is over, anxiety about what comes next, and celebration of one’s accomplishments. But none of these sentiments has much to do with having some poor visitor get pulled in from off the street to give yet another collection of pious advice to assembled graduates eager to get out of here. The only reason you can stand it is because you are too young to know what people as old as I am know, and because you are too old to roll on the floor and kick your legs in the air in protest. But, anyway, here I am, the graduation speaker apprehended at the corner of Sumner and Forest Park and ordered to give a speech – and here are you. So we had better make the best of it. What can I tell you, in place of a proper graduation speech?

When I was fourteen or fifteen, younger than you, and an inmate of a British boarding school, I made some discoveries about the larger world. Every Christmas my family bought me a copy of something called the British Empire Annual, a yearly compilation for children about the far-flung possessions of Britain – with photographs of exotic animals and steaming rain forests, happy farm laborers, loggers, fishermen, all of them in the paradise of the British Empire. We now know that these people did not inhabit a paradise, and that life under British rule, while it may have had its compensations, was not always easy. I loved these books, in part because they were printed on heavy, creamy paper that gave off a wonderful odor, but mostly because their message of exoticism appealed to my imagination. But I was a bit suspicious. I had an aunt who lived in what was then Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, and her take on the people she called Africans seemed rather patronizing and not entirely sympathetic. And, early on, I started reading newspapers and learned that the imperial life was fraught with problems. I collected stamps, so I learned about geography, and knew where all the places mentioned in the books actually were. And at school I had friends from foreign countries, including several African and Asian countries, whose views were often quite different from those I read about in books.

They also spoke other languages. I had been learning French for a number of years and had started Latin. When I was fourteen I added German – under the tutelage of a teacher who no doubt did his best but whom I found impossible to deal with, perhaps projecting my difficulties with German on to him. I was lousy at German yet increasingly interested in languages – not as things learned out of books but as ways of being in the world, as ways of thinking about the world, ways of constructing it. The sheer perversity of a language (yet another language...) that insisted that the definite article had to agree with

the adjective which had to agree with the noun caused me to reflect on whether the Germans would actually mind terribly if I didn't get their language quite right. My teacher said they would: I imagined myself arrested by the language police on the streets of Düsseldorf or Frankfurt and left to molder in a German jail because my adjectives didn't agree with my nouns. It was only years later that I discovered that you could actually make yourself understood in German even if you couldn't get the grammar right. It was at about this time that I went abroad for the first time – to Paris, with an uncle and aunt. It was the first time I had ever used French in a real life situation. The plumbing in the hotel was problematic. The wash-basin in my room had push-down faucets. When I pushed down the first time, the entire washbasin slid slowly off the wall and swung clear, suspended on its bendy lead pipes. I went downstairs to the front desk and, in a combination of adolescent embarrassment and linguistic pride, uttered my first French sentence in France: “Mon lavabo est tombé de le mur,” my wash-basin has fallen off the wall. I have never looked back.

It was at about this time that I learned an entirely different language, Esperanto, an invented international language, and soon, with the hesitant encouragement of my family, I was crisscrossing Europe visiting friends who spoke Esperanto in Germany, France, Poland, Hungary, Denmark. I had become a member of an international community and I had learned to question received opinion by making my own contacts with the world, and asking my own questions. Today, I'm still doing it, now on a worldwide scale.

Questioning received opinion – that's what matters. Seize on anything that will help you do it. You have learned to question, I hope, here at the MacDuffie School. A willingness to question has served me well as I have learned more about the world. Although I have made a living as an English professor and then as a university president, and although I have always been committed to teaching and learning – although I love Shakespeare above all and love to teach and write about him – still it is the excitement of asking questions of the larger world that draws me.

You have grown up in a world that still does not practice principles of equality any more than ours did – but also in a world that has not had the rather perverse advantage of waging a war (World War II) in which the principles of democracy were clearly arrayed against those of dictatorship. Back then it was easy. When the United Nations was founded in 1945, we knew why it was founded: to allow every individual human being a free and productive life in the context of the rule of law. The United Nations Charter laid out its intentions with great clarity:

***We the Peoples of the United Nations Determined***

to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war, which twice in our lifetime has brought untold sorrow to mankind, and  
 to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women and of nations large and small, and  
 to establish conditions under which justice and respect for the obligations arising from treaties and other sources of international law can be maintained, and

to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

***And for these Ends***

to practice tolerance and live together in peace with one another as good neighbors, and

to unite our strength to maintain international peace and security, and

to ensure by the acceptance of principles and the institution of methods, that armed force shall not be used, save in the common interest, and

to employ international machinery for the promotion of the economic and social advancement of all peoples,

***Have Resolved to Combine our Efforts to Accomplish these Aims***

Accordingly, our respective Governments, through representatives assembled in the city of San Francisco, who have exhibited their full powers found to be in good and due form, have agreed to the present Charter of the United Nations and do hereby establish an international organization to be known as the United Nations.

The Charter of the United Nations was followed three years later by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, hammered out largely through the persistence of Eleanor Roosevelt, and ultimately ratified by all of the members of the United Nations. The Universal Declaration does not say that we are all the same, or that there are not many different ways of life in this world, but it does set out as universal principles such matters as the equality of all human beings, the right to an education, the right to a fair trial, freedom from torture, the right to vote and to petition one's government, – in other words those principles that allow for democratic pluralism and participation. The governments that ratified the document were themselves often offenders against these principles, but the act of ratification confirmed their determination to try to carry them out. Today, documents like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and other internationally agreed-upon documents are immensely important for people suffering government oppression. Sometimes they are all they have. The Iranian campaigner for the rule of law and Nobel prizewinner, Shirin Ebadi, when she visited the United States recently, stressed the value simply of having these documents as weapons against oppression. Cynics will say that they are just words. But words are the most powerful weapons there are. We need to know these documents by heart.

What has happened to these ideals sixty years later? We have grown skeptical about the efficacy of the United Nations as a body and hesitant to share our wealth with others. We neglect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and even the principles enshrined in our own constitution. We have grown to believe that the processes of globalization will inevitably benefit our way of life and that globalization is a spontaneous and natural process, even though it may benefit us more than others and even though many others suffer as a consequence. Because of the actions of a few, we have apparently learned that the most “sophisticated” people are those who believe least in the goodness of their fellows and that to express suspicion of others is better than to express and display trust. What an absurd idea – given that 9/11 was an expression of just such a feeling by the terrorists themselves. If you don't believe in others, you become like your enemies. We fear foreigners because we are convinced that many of them are out to harm us. We fear

members of other religions because their fundamental beliefs are different from ours. We fear this; we fear that. Ladies and gentlemen, ignorance and fear go hand in hand. Knowledge makes one free – free to choose and free to act.

Yet in international affairs we have grown to believe that you take action first and learn about your adversary later, that it's easier to take action in ignorance than to do so with wisdom. Take Iraq for example. Perhaps you believe the invasion was a good thing. But you must admit that many people, among them members of congress and of the government, say today, "If we had known what we know now, we would never have supported the invasion of Iraq"? What kind of excuse is that? What's the matter with Amazon.com? What's the matter with teachers? What's the matter with schools? What's the matter with libraries? What's the matter with travel? What's the matter with languages? What's the matter with common sense? What's the matter with demanding answers from one's government and not resting until one has them? And what's the matter with telling the truth? With a country in ruins and thousands dead, is it really all right just to declare, "If we had known what we know now, we would never have invaded Iraq"? What arrogance! What stupidity! What capitulation to the power of ignorance!

Perhaps in your lifetime we will say the same about global warming, about the spread of AIDS, about overpopulation, about lack of water, about the many other scourges that afflict our world: perhaps we will say, "If we knew what we know now, we would not have acted as we did." Or perhaps, just perhaps, we will say "Because we knew what we knew, and knew it in a timely fashion, the world we inhabit today is a fairer place, a more decent place, a place where life and its values are better preserved and maintained." Or you will say of yourselves, "Because I went out and helped, because I saw for myself, because I volunteered, because I learned, because I taught, because I ministered to the sick, because I studied and applied my studies, the world is a better place." Don't believe the cynics who say you can't make a difference. Don't believe those who say that, because the problems of this world will never be fully overcome, it isn't worth the effort. Don't succumb to despair, don't succumb to selfishness, and don't succumb to the arrogance of thinking yourself superior to others.

I said I wouldn't deliver a graduation speech – but now I have done it anyway. It's time to stop.

I hope that your years here at MacDuffie have brought you into contact with the larger world – not least by meeting people from all parts of the world and sharing your lives with them – but I hope that this is just the beginning of a life of teaching and learning, earning and giving back, questioning and answering. You are members of a fine community and as alumni you will always remain part of it. I want to congratulate the teachers of this grand group of young men and women. And also their parents. As for me, I'm going back to Sumner and Forest Park. Perhaps I'll finally get to the supermarket. But there's a spring in my step because I've met you, and because I know that you will go out and accomplish wonders.