



High School Graduation

June 6, 2004

Speech by Martin Indyk, Parent Speaker

Peter Branch, incoming Chairman of the Board of Trustees Ralph Cunningham, Paul Levy, Gloria Runyon, Barbara Bitner, teachers, parents and families, but most important, you, yes you - the Georgetown Day School graduating class of 2004, sitting there in your finest clothes, enveloped in the warmth that comes from all the love and pride that's flowing out of the hearts of your families and teachers and friends that encouraged you toward this moment. From up here you look amazing, awesome, dare I say it "you are chill."

And me, up here? I'm definitely "NOT chill." In fact I'm sweating profusely. Why? By now, I must have given thousands of speeches. I've had the privilege in my life of advising princes and potentates, kings and presidents and prime ministers. But I've never been more daunted by this honor and this challenge of addressing and advising you.

I'm immobilized partly by the fact that I normally speak about peace in the Middle East, or rather the lack of it. But I was surprised to hear from my son Jake, who is graduating with you today, that you really weren't interested in me discussing those prospects today.

I'm immobilized by the fact that as a graduating parent, I have the honor and responsibility for speaking to you on their behalf too -- and since there's so much that they all want to tell you, I'm afraid I won't cover it all.

I'm also afraid that I'll embarrass Jake by choking up with the emotion that every one of us parents is feeling at this moment, as we realize that our job is essentially done and your work is just about to begin for you, as we reflect on all those memories of your childhood and growing up -- all the joy and tears, all the setbacks and triumphs, all the conversations and arguments, all the challenges of preparing you for the responsibilities you are about to have to take on for yourselves. I'm afraid I'll find it difficult to talk because of that lump in the throat that we all have as we look on you with such great pride at what you have achieved for yourselves and with such great concern for how you will cope with the exciting but often unfair and harsh world out there

beyond the cocoon we have maintained for you over these past 18 years.

I'm also immobilized by the challenge implied in this invitation to address you, the obligation it imposes on me to try to impart some wisdom that I have garnered from the life I've led, some piece of advice that you will remember from this day and that you will take with you and that will somehow help you make your way. And I am humbled by that challenge. I want to try to explain why, in the hope that just maybe through the explanation you will be able to draw your own conclusion, and learn your own lesson for the opportunities and choices that await you. For that's what today marks. It's the end of your formal school education and the beginning of your informal education in the school of life. It's the end of living a virtual life by watching reality shows on television and the beginning of living your very own reality show.

My life story begins in Sydney, Australia, as you might have figured from the lingering accent. Americans view Australians as just like us, only a little less complicated, living life on the frontier with beautiful beaches, shrimp on the barby, and endless barrels of beer -- a bit like college in the U.S. I'm told. Why would I leave such a paradise for Washington, a place as you know that is overpopulated with politicians and lawyers and monuments, a place that has far too much weather, and doesn't have a beach?

There were many reasons, but the most important was that I discovered for myself what people mean when they call this "a land of opportunity." You see Australia is a country with a small population -- when I was your age it had only twelve million people and the vast majority of them live along the coastline, because in the middle of Australia there's just desert, lots of it, and some kangaroos. So Australia may look like a large country on the map but it's actually a very small country and in a small country the opportunity is limited. And what that does to its people is not just to limit their horizons but also to lead them to believe that their success can only come at the expense of somebody else's. It was so prevalent in Australian culture at the time that they actually had a name for it, they called it "the tall poppy" syndrome - meaning that anybody who stood out amongst the pack of poppies because of their ambition and drive and creativity, had to be pulled down to the same level as everybody else.

In America, I discovered, the exact opposite was true. People here want to see you succeed; indeed they see your success as a validation of their values. There are enough resources to go around here; the market is big enough to support any and every good idea and quite a few bad

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ones as well. In this country we are not constrained by fear and scarcity and lack of opportunity. Where else in the world could a recent immigrant with a funny accent rise in a decade from an obscure job writing a newsletter for a lobbying organization to become the first Australian Jew to be the American Ambassador to the state of Israel?

Or where else in the world could the son of an itinerant shoe salesman born in Tampico, Illinois, an indifferent student and an actor in B-grade Hollywood movies, rise to become first the Governor of California and then the Fortieth President of the United States? Ronald Reagan, who died yesterday, and whose memory we honor today, was a man who believed that, in his words, "America should reach for the stars." And that's exactly what he did in his life. And this land of opportunity supported him and rewarded him for it.

You, many of whom have grown up in an environment of immense privilege, you who have had the benefit of an education in one of the finest schools in America, and you who are now going on to attend some of the very best colleges in this country, you have an extraordinary opportunity to reach for your own stars, to define your own dreams and to follow them with courage and conviction.

Will you take advantage of that opportunity? Will you come to understand that, in Maurice Sendak's memorable words (in *Higglety, Pigglety, Pop*), "there's more to life than having everything?" From here on in, it's basically up to you. And that's why I'm also immobilized today, because I don't know how to convey to you in a way that you will understand and remember -- that you must never take this privilege and opportunity for granted.

Perhaps you've heard of Jimmy Wolfensohn? He's a fellow-Australian who like me became an American and took advantage of the opportunities in this country to become President of the World Bank. He puts the point I'm trying to make in this way: There are 1 billion people who live in the developed world and 5 billion people who live in the developing world. The one billion of us enjoy over 80 percent of the world's income; the five billion of them, enjoy under 20 percent; 2.8 billion of them have to exist on under \$2 a day. By contrast with the education you have enjoyed, Wolfensohn points out that in the 47 countries of sub-Saharan Africa there are 130 million children, most of them girls, who don't even have the opportunity to go to elementary school.

To the extent that you internalize that reality, to that extent you will come to understand over time that the privilege and opportunity you have been given as a birthright also comes with an expectation -- that you will make the most of it, that you will do the best you can, and that along the way you will give something back to your family, to your community, to your nation and yes to the world -- even if it's just your world and you do it just one person at a time. And to the extent that you fulfill that expectation, to that extent you will also enrich your lives.

In my case, I thought the way I could serve was to put my knowledge and experience to work in the pursuit of peace in the Middle East. For eight years I worked with President Clinton and a team of deeply dedicated Americans on what I thought was a noble endeavor. We had some important successes along the way - we helped make a lasting peace between Israel and Jordan, we established what I believe will end up being the parameters of final peace agreements between Israel and Syria and Israel and the Palestinians. But all along the way we were beset by obstacles, by violence and terrorism and by the assassination of one of peace's most courageous exponents, Yitzhak Rabin. And in the end, as you can see by all the Israeli and Palestinian blood that has been shed in the last three years, we failed. What was the lesson here?

Was it that it was better not to try at all, than to try and fail? I don't think so. We sallied forth with naive optimism. It's the American Way. We think it's our duty to try to share our values of life, liberty and equality with the world, to be a beacon unto the nations. We approach every problem in the belief that it has a solution, that it's only a matter of figuring out what it is. And then we come up against the reality of a brutal and cynical world - a world that I hope you never encounter but chances are, in this day and age, that you might. You see, opportunity begets hope and hope begets action. But as we now know from our bitter experience in Iraq, action also begets disappointment.

What do you do when that happens? Retreat into yourselves, put up a wall, give up the effort? Or do you learn from your mistakes, figure out what you did wrong and try again, the next time with less arrogance and more humility, greater realism and lower expectations, less ideology and more pragmatism, less talk and more listening. That too is the American way. Or to put it in the words of Winston Churchill, an Englishman with an American mother, believe it or not in a graduation speech to the students of Harrow, his high school in England: "Never give in --

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never, never, never, never, in nothing great or small, large or petty, never give in..."

It was the very same sense of conviction that informed the words of the Hebrew sages centuries ago, when one of them wrote in the Perkei Avot, the Sayings of the Fathers:

"The day is short, the task is great. It is not up to you to finish the job. But neither can you desist from it."

That I believe is the critical lesson of our failure so far to bring peace to the Middle East. And I offer it to you today with all my own humility as a lesson that you might want to carry with you in your life. Don't expect to succeed at everything you do; but don't ever stop trying. Don't expect to finish what you start, but for heaven's sake, start it! And in doing so, I hope you will come to recognize in your lives -- as I have come belatedly to recognize in mine -- that satisfaction and fulfillment comes from the road you take and the way you travel on it, and the love and friendships that you make and nurture along the way, rather than whether or not you ever reach your destination. I hope you will come to see that your journey is your destination.

As you embark on your road today, I would urge you to remember one other thing too. When you find your dream and decide to follow it, don't forget to take your imagination with you, don't forget to imagine the consequences of your actions. Because they do have consequences, and many times they turn out to be unintended, sometimes even disastrous. Look at us. We tried to make a comprehensive peace in the Middle East and we ended up with what looked like comprehensive war.

Your life, if you choose to live it to the full, will also be full of those unintended consequences, those ironies great and small that you will come to pick up and appreciate along the way, which will represent the getting of your own wisdom.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the English poet and critic who lived at the beginning of the 19th century once wrote, "The light which experience gives us is a lantern on the stern which shines only on the waves behind us." And that's my last wish for you. We as your parents have tried to shine the light which experience has given to us as a "lantern on the stern" to illuminate the waves that we leave behind and that you will encounter ahead of you.

You are about to embark upon the exciting adventure called life. It's a little scary to be sure.

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Your teachers and we have given you a sturdy and swift boat to maneuver in. And we will always be there to provide you with a safe harbor in the storm. But ships were never designed simply for staying in safe harbors. Now you have to put to sea, to set your own sails, decide on your own voyage, and make your own waves. With a tear in our eyes and a lump in our throats, we wish that the waves that you make and illuminate with the lantern on your stern will be wondrous to behold. We wish you Godspeed.