

AGS COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS 2011

Given by Alan Riding on June 17, 2011

Congratulations to you all! Today you have reached a watershed, not the first, not the last, but an important one, one where you can say that you set out to achieve this degree – and you have succeeded. Bravo!

Now, before you head off on the next stage of life, you have one more rite of passage, this strange tradition known as a commencement address in which some elderly person is invited to talk to you about your futures based on the experience of his or her long-ago past. Frankly, that doesn't make too much sense. How can I put myself in your shoes? I can see that you're all brighter than I was at your age – or am now.

So that's my excuse for talking in generalities, starting with when I was younger than you all, when I was at boarding school in England a good 50 years ago. At the end of each school year, when some boys – yes, it was all boys – were leaving school for good, there'd be a service in the school chapel and the minister would always end with these words of counsel to the departing students:

Go forth into the world in peace;
Be of good cheer,
Hold fast that which is good,
Render to no one evil for evil.
Strengthen the fainthearted,
Support the weak,
Help the afflicted,
Honor all persons.

This would be followed by a blessing which, if I remember how we behaved at school, was frankly very necessary if any of us were to live up to those fine words. Yet they have often come back to me over the years, not as a religious message, but as a pretty good blueprint for making the world a better place:

Go forth into the world in peace – well, yes. Be courageous, recognize what is good and what is evil, help those worse off than yourself, treat everyone as you'd like to be treated.

OK, in practice, it may not that easy. But it's a good place to start because basically it's saying: whatever you do, you make a difference, for good or bad; and if you want to, you can make a positive difference. In fact, I'd go further: those of us privileged enough to have a good education have a duty to try to make the world a better place.

Wow, you may think. Little me? The world a better place? I mean, have you *seen* the world? Wars, rebellions, tyrannical regimes, poverty, drought, flooding, diseases, global warming, spluttering economic growth in countries that are meant to be advanced, corruption, greed as a kind of creed of the ruling financial elite. And you're asking *me* to improve the world?

Well, yes! But first let me start by quoting something I read the other day attributed to Plutarch. I only mention Plutarch to give some extra weight to what after all is fairly self-evident: What we achieve inwardly will change outer reality.

Now that may sound a bit New Age-ish: we light some incense, close our eyes and go hmmmm... And reality changes. No, not quite. It just means taking a good look – an objective look, if that is possible – at ourselves, who we are, how do people see us, what are our dreams, how realistic are they, how can we achieve them, do we have the talent, the discipline, the patience to do so?

To those qualities, I might add two other useful things to have. Good luck, certainly good health, also perhaps being in the right place at the right time. The other is a good role model, or more than one. There's nothing like having a teacher, a boss, a friend whom you really respect and who can inspire you to seek excellence. Ah, yes, one other thing: don't forget Woody Allen's prescription for success: 5% inspiration, 95% perspiration.

OK, so you start by knowing and accepting who you are. You then connect to your fantasies and give them a reality check. I mean, you're never going to become Queen of England or world heavyweight boxing champion. But you *can* dream of the job or role or responsibility that you think might suit you perfectly. This may not be immediately apparent. In my case, it came to me by way of elimination: I made a mental list of the careers I could do and then crossed out those that I didn't want to do, those that didn't fit the dream.

So once your fantasy has been defined, you have to determine the steps to achieve it. And we're talking, step by step by step. While you fix your eyes on a distant objective, you must keep looking down to make sure you don't stumble.

Because as important as fulfilling this dream, is the journey towards it because most of life is actually that: a journey full of surprises that never really ends. Hopefully, both the dream and the journey will mobilize your knowledge, talents, experience; ideally, you will also enjoy yourself.

But remember, no one is suggesting: “This is it. You’ve got your Master’s. You’ve got your PhD. Now off you go and live off it.” However well you’ve done, the learning must go on and on. Also, after you have set off, there’s nothing stopping you from changing direction.

My brother was a nuclear physicist and in the family we used to joke that he was building an H-bomb. In fact, he was quite unhappy and, one day, he resigned his job and went to work as a television producer at the BBC. It’s also never too late to start afresh. Just this week I heard about this guy in England who left school at 16 and became an apprentice in a telephone company. People would call up: “Hello? My phone is making a funny noise.” And they’d send this guy round to fix it. When he was 22, he decided he wanted more out of life, so he went back to studying. Eleven years later, after getting his doctorate in electronic engineering, he was a full professor of cybernetics.

Anyway, one way or other, you’re off. But, as you leave, there are three areas I’d like you to bear in mind, hopefully to explore - not because they’ll help you get a job or a promotion (although they might); not because you can’t survive without them (you can); not that you’ll necessarily even notice if you ignore them (how can you measure what you don’t know?). That said, I think they can help you understand yourselves and other people.

First is LANGUAGE. I don’t mean languages: I’m sure many of you speak several languages. I mean a familiarity with language, with any language; a self-confidence with words that enables you to express yourself not only clearly but in a captivating way. I remember from my years in journalism how people would say of different reporters: Oh, he can write. Or, he couldn’t write himself out of a paper-bag. Yet all of these reporters were being published daily. The difference was that those who wrote well were more successful in getting their message across. The same applies if you’re writing a report for a UN agency, a country analysis for a bank, a speech for a minister or a press release for an NGO. It’s not enough to know your subject, to know your message. You also need to master the medium of expressing it – words.

At the moment, you may have two disadvantages. One is that you have been writing academic essays where, alas, all too often, convoluted language, buzz words and clichés, and quotations from weighty sources can easily obscure meaning and, dare I say in this erudite company, can just as easily disguise ignorance. Your other disadvantage is that you belong to the age of the email, Facebook and Twitter, which are rapidly creating a new language. I'm not judging it because there's nothing to be done about it, but I suspect that it is no substitute for engaging with the fullness of a language. Someone who writes clearly is someone who thinks clearly.

The second area I'd like to emphasize is HISTORY. You may say, "I have so much trouble keeping up with the world today, how can I possibly find time to study the past?" Point taken. We do know so much more about the world today than in the past; we also have a clearer idea of what we don't know. I mean, for some time after 9/11, the President of the United States didn't know the difference between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. Perhaps he still doesn't. I mean the last president, of course. Well, since then, we've all had to take a crash course on Islam.

More recently, with the Arab Spring, popular uprisings against nasty dictatorships seemed simple enough – good vanquishing evil - until we looked more closely at the tribal and religious structures of, say, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria. Or further back, how can we understand the Middle East without knowing how the British and the French carved it up into nations after the First World War. Or how can we understand European attitudes towards Islam without recognizing the fear implanted in Europe by the Ottoman Empire, which twice reached the gates of Vienna, itself capital of the Holy Roman Empire.

We can take any part of the world and the same applies. I'm not saying we can get to know everything or even something about everywhere. But you do need to know the history of where you're living, where you're working, what you're working on. Many years ago, I wrote a book about contemporary Mexico and I included two chapters on the country's history because, for example, the Aztec emperors Moctezuma and Cuauhtémoc and the revolutionaries Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa are still highly relevant points of reference.

To give you an extreme example: when I arrived in France 20 years ago, I was surprised to hear French people reminding me of the 100 Years' War between the French and English. The war ended 550 years ago, but it still shapes French views of the Brits. A different example: during the German occupation of France in the Second World War, Joan of Arc was resuscitated by both collaborators and the

resistance: for collaborators, she was a heroine for fighting the English; for the resistance, she was a heroine for fighting the invader, who this time happened to be German.

Whether history repeats itself as tragedy or farce is not central to my argument. Cultural history, social, political and economic history, they all serve as spotlights illuminating the present. One learns. One learns through mistakes. I remember 30 plus years ago cheering on the overthrow of a dynastic dictatorship in Latin America, taking for granted that a democratic regime would follow. Instead, a new form of dictatorship was installed. I should not have been surprised: this has frequently happened in history. But being wrong then means that today, as I watch people rising up in different Arab countries, I cannot help wondering what will follow. In 2003, when Iraqis threw stones instead of flowers at American soldiers, the American Defense Secretary shrugged it off by saying, “Stuff happens.” Well, dear Donald Rumsfeld, it might not have happened if you had listened to history rather than the neo-cons!

Now, finally, our third secret weapon – THE ARTS, life and its emotions translated into – interpreted as – literature, music, theater, dance, films, paintings, sculpture, photography. Wow, that’s a lot! Well, obviously, no one can expect to appreciate, even less, to have a deep knowledge of all these art forms. But intense exposure to any one of them, as spectators or readers or, even better, as creators and performers, can open the mind and spirit in unexpected and immensely rewarding ways.

Hey, you may ask, how does that help me to get a well-paying job with a great bonus and a fistful of stock options? OK, perhaps it won’t, if that is your ambition. But if your aim is to understand that life has many other rich dimensions, then the arts can serve as guides. And, of these art forms, I’d argue that literature – that is, fiction – is the most stimulating when it comes to stirring the imagination. With many other art forms – theater, opera, cinema, ballet – as a spectator, you are reacting emotionally to what you see, to what others are doing. With fiction, as a reader you are part of the creative experience. A novel sits there, inanimate, until you the reader bring it to life with your imagination. And using your imagination is the most exhilarating form of freedom.

Artists, whether creators or performers, also serve to remind us that no reward comes without a degree of danger, without the risk of failure. Every artist takes a part of himself or herself and presents it to the world to be judged. Every dancer who leaps, every soprano aiming for a high C, every painter, actor or

novelist who tries to touch us must stand naked with his or her art. In our own world, the audiences may be smaller, but it also takes courage to be different.

So there you are! Everything you need to know about life from someone who got a lot of things wrong. The key things are to aim high, to learn from your failures, to laugh at the absurdities of life, not to take yourself too seriously – and never forget that, in ways big or small, we can all make a difference.

So, as the preacher said, Go forth into the world in peace, Be of good cheer – and, while you're at it, please fix the world we're leaving you. It needs your help.

Thank you and good luck.