

**AGS Commencement Speech  
by Ambassador Jeremy Kinsman  
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FELICITATIONS!

Here I am a recovering Ambassador, now a democracy activist, tasked with giving you advice about the rest of your lives.

Actually, the advice about which I'm most confident comes from my own enchanted spell as a master's student in Paris. My advice is pretty harsh. Sorry to be the one to break the news. You've just spent the best years of your lives.

Oh, well. But you have some brand-new and valuable credentials as foreign affairs experts. Don't think you're not needed at home. My current experience is that business and other executives responsible for international operations finally get that it is essential to understand the countries where they are operating. Having invaded Iraq with zero knowledge about the place, the US military turned on a dime. A few years ago, the professional specialty most sought after by the military was that of cultural anthropologist.

There are lots of different ways to exercise your knowledge of foreign affairs – in business, law,

teaching, and public service, as diplomats or with development and humanitarian NGOs.

Whatever you do, I bet you'll be doing something different in ten years. Today change is normal. In career paths and in the surprises which surround us in world affairs.

The key thing is to embrace change. It's easiest if you are centred on strong values of your own. Every profession is struggling with the tension between values and interests, not just diplomacy. Stay true to your values and the interests will follow.

At our core, we are democrats. We generally don't think about it. We take our rights for granted. They are part of our hard-wiring.

Yet half of humanity lacks our rights.

The Arab Spring ought to confirm for once and for all that the desire for freedom and political participation is not a cultural peculiarity of Europe and North America. Democracy is flourishing in Latin America, India, and Indonesia.

Nowhere is immune. The Chinese leadership maintains that China is different, and can pursue a form of democracy with "Chinese characteristics," which is code for the Party holding on to its monopoly

on political power. The great dissident physicist Fang Lizhi used to ask his adoring students at the time of Tiananmen if they believed in physics with Chinese characteristics. He wrote that the principles of human rights are like the principles of science – universal.

But they are always at risk.

Do you ever wonder what it must be like without democracy?.....To be afraid of going to jail for saying the wrong thing, or in Iran, for wearing the wrong thing, or not wearing it.

Anna Akhmatova tried to describe it on behalf of the victims, the millions of silent people just trying to survive. In Leningrad in the darkest night of Stalin's terror she would visit the prison where her son and her husband were locked up because she was too well-known to be taken herself.

The only way of knowing if your loved one was still alive and still there was to bring a package. If they called your name and accepted it, the news was good. Women huddled outside the walls in the dark winter cold.

Names were called. Then, "Akhmatova."

Faces turned toward the writer. A voice whispered, "Can you describe this?"

“I can,” she promised. And did. But still we find it hard to grasp the world of fear.

The struggle for rights and against fear is a human story. It has martyrs and heroes.

Anna Politkovskaya. Russian journalist. Relentless in exposing atrocities in Chechnya and crooked murderous dealings by the mafia. They murdered her.

Las damas de blanco. They were the wives of journalists and human rights defenders thrown into jail in Cuba for being honest. They are out now, in part because these brave women, with their silent walks through Havana after Sunday Mass embarrassed the regime before the world’s eyes.

We didn’t see humanitarian physician Karen Woo die in Afghanistan, shot in cold blood because she was helping children, but she stays alive in our free heads.

Aung San Suu Kyi. When she was finally released from house arrest after 20 years, she was asked how it felt to be free. “My mind was always free,” she said.

But she reminded us that freedom may need a battle.

Such battles have terrible risks for people who are trying just to survive, which is an act of courage just in itself.

In Cuba, people were scared to criticize Fidel – if they had to refer to him; they just mimicked a beard with their hand.

In Libya, no one said Ghaddafi's name. He had a simple method of dealing with vocal opponents. He killed them. For 42 years.

Yet, In Dara'a, Syria, hundreds of students marched in peaceful protest for basic human rights while snipers lined the rooftops.

They chanted, "Sniper, sniper, what do you see? Here are our necks. Here are our heads."

Could we be that brave? Perhaps, if we had that little to lose and so much to gain.

But there is much we can do to support such brave people in what is their struggle on behalf of values we share.

We can't export democracy.

It has to emerge from the people in question, each in its own way. Each trajectory is different.

But the process always has two chapters.

In Chapter One there is the build-up over time of resentment over the grievous costs of being not free. Their humiliating effect.

A “shared awareness” emerges.

To know what was going on, Tunisians didn't need to depend on Wiki leaks and the US Ambassador's description of the obscene excess of the dictator's son-in-law's seaside house, with its caged tiger, and ice cream desserts flown in from St Tropez. Or that the dictator's immediate family controlled 50% of the country's economy.

These were open secrets. But when fruit vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire because of injustice, it became the tipping point. People rose up. Open secrets became public truths.

When protests become uprisings in Chapter One, the self-discipline of nonviolence is essential.

Gandhi is sometimes mistakenly portrayed as a pacifist. He wasn't. But he knew that if protest turns violent, dictators usually out-violence the people.

He turned to *Satyagraha* – truth power, or a force more powerful.

In Tunisia and Egypt, the protests did stay nonviolent and the army refused orders to shoot peaceful

protestors. As they have in other critical places. Moscow, and Kiev.

In others, Tiananmen, Rangoon, and Tehran security forces followed deadly orders to shoot to kill. The peaceful uprisings were put down. For only for a while.

In Syria, the regime thinks it can do the same. Militias have murdered innocent children. But sooner or later, this regime will fall. Dictators inevitably go down, or out.

Once they do, Chapter Two begins, the transition to democracy. It's often more difficult than Chapter One.

I learned in Russia in the 90s that democracy is behavioural. It has to be learned. It takes time.

It's not a process - an "app" that can be downloaded. It's about more than elections. It's about what happens after the elections. Especially about managing pluralism. Tribes, religions, sects, regions, winners and losers.

People need our help to build the capacity to do that. Not to tell them how we do things (because we often don't do them so well ourselves) but to support their own learning process and to help them deliver transparent and effective government, including first and foremost safety and law and order, and human

and minority rights rooted in law. And education that's actually useful.

The Arab Spring has been over much more than absence of democracy.

It is a protest against a system's failed promises.

Privileged interests call the shots and get the rewards. It is inherently unfair, especially to the young. If they got education, there were no jobs.

Sound a bit familiar?

As the Arab Spring spreads, I hear that maybe it's a mistake to support such uprisings, which seem to bring instability to a volatile and critical place – the Middle East.

It is a critical place, especially to the people who live there.

60% of them are under 30. Arab youth are no longer humiliated by being outside the conversation. The student movement in Yemen is called "*Tahrir*" – change.

They are wired to what is going on elsewhere. They know their societies are unjust.



They know how we live here. They expect us to live up to what we say are our values. To be consistent.

The Middle East is inherently unstable because it is unjust.

We were *gamed* by dictators who claimed to be our allies in a wider war against “terror.” It led to false choices – such as dictators or islamists. The delusion persuaded our security agencies to sub-contract dictators to torture “rendered” suspected terrorists.

It was immoral, but also dumb.

We invested in losers.

And contradicted who we are.

We are democrats but also pluralists.

The real difference in the Middle East is not between Islamists and non-Islamists, but between pluralists and non-pluralists. Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt are showing there can be pluralism in Islamic societies.

We come – most of us - from pluralistic societies where individual and minority rights are rooted in law.

Younger people are much better at pluralism of all kinds.

The principles of tolerance and inclusivity are issues you can bring into whatever profession you are following.

You share narratives with them because we all share the human condition and human aspirations.

But what do you do about it?

First, please pay attention. Whatever you're doing, don't be in a bubble.

Their struggles are also about us.

Our democracy is in our hands.

Other peoples' democracies should also be in our heads and hearts. It's not up just to governments to help but up to us, civil society, to lead in supporting civil society elsewhere. As democrats.

No profession is immune to the discussion of how to reconcile values and interests.

Some of you will become diplomats, I imagine. I can share some advice.

One thing I have learned about my former profession. It is by instinct too conservative, too afraid of change. over-investing in the status quo and failing to heed the

warning signs from inside diplomatic or corporate bubbles.

Let me suggest some guidelines for behavior.

I worked for several years at the UN. It is often called “a talk shop.” It is not a compliment.

Delegates do talk too much. They lecture. They criticize. They take shots.

I remember a representative of the Pinochet dictatorship that had overturned democracy in Chile taking the floor after his government had been vividly criticized in some debate by the East German (when there was an East Germany that was part of the Soviet Bloc.)

The Chilean said he “refused to accept the criticism from the Soviet Union’s delegate. Who was he to pronounce on issues of freedom,” and so on?

The Soviet delegate then sought the floor on a point of privilege. “Madame Chairman, I haven’t said a word in this debate,” he protested. “Why does the Chilean colleague criticize my country?”

“Because,” the Chilean said, “if the neighbour’s dog comes and does his business on your lawn, to whom do you complain? To the dog or to its master?”

That was a great line, and everybody laughed, because it had some truth obviously, as the Soviet delegate was the first to know.

Truth has power. But be moderate in speaking what you believe from your standpoint to be the truth about other peoples' realities.

The best thing a diplomat can do is listen. To make "talk shops" a listening shop.

Listening to the priorities of others, which may not be yours.

A remarkable Algerian diplomat, Brahimi, was tasked a few years ago by the worried Security Council to try to mediate the deadly differences in Iraq among warring parties, sects, tribes, and factions which threatened to degenerate into complete chaos at the cost of many, many lives.

He succeeded.

How? He set out to hear from each of the disputants what precisely was their minimum requirement from the others.

In satisfying everybody's minimum requirement, he was able to construct and propose a package of settlement which had a chance of holding together. Everybody had to compromise.

He achieved this by listening, not by talking.

Yesterday, I was at the offices of one of my conference partners, the International Federation for Human Rights.

They have a watchword slogan – “Keep Your Eyes Open.”

Now that is good advice. It’s got a life-time guarantee, I promise.

Particularly if you are determined to remember who you are.

With open eyes, ears, and open minds, change will be your friend.

Of course, some things don’t change. I hope that continues to include Paris.

It includes the moving scene of young people setting out to succeed in a world that could stand some improvement.

Yes, you can.

Congratulations and good luck.

