

Where the Road Leads You

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Ambassador Howard Gutman
Belgium American School

Principal Goldman, Dr. McIntyre, General, Colonel, teachers, parents, friends, students and the graduating class of 2010.

Scott, thanks so much for that wonderful introduction.

There is a smile that grows on a parent's face. A special smile. Reserved only for top occasions. Births, weddings- rare and special days. Today is a rare and special day.

So let that smile shine.

I know firsthand. I was in the United States for two days recently to watch my older son graduate from college. The smile stayed glued for hours. For although the students have done the work, the parents have done the worrying. Tests, rehearsals, sports meets, the social roller coaster of high school. You have endured it all. Congratulations parents, from all of this you have graduated. Let that smile shine.

Now for those who have done the work, the graduates, you too are entitled to that smile. To that deep breath that feels so good as you inhale and lifts you off the ground. There is work or college ahead and yes the journey has far to go. But that is for a later day. Today is for that smile.

And then you will get on with the work, for much is ahead that needs to be done. You see, you are a very important audience. You have a very important task ahead. Indeed, we have a future to build together- the future of the world. And as we set out to build that future together, we have so many past mistakes of my generation to overcome together. This time, in building the future together now, we have to get it right.

For far too long, my generation has built a world with far too much distrust between people of different nationalities, between East and West. Distrust and misunderstanding has sometimes bred violence and violence has led to greater violence and war. In some countries today all over the globe, some people make judgments about foreigners whom they have never met and in other countries some people make judgments about neighbors whom they see daily based primarily on name, skin color, ethnic background or religion.

Can we not do better?

For far too long, my generation has built a world where more go hungry and fewer thrive. Where concern for the future of the planet increases, but success at making it more secure, more prosperous and with a longer shelf life decreases.

Can we not do better?

This group – the 2010 graduates of the Brussels American School – has a wonderful opportunity to do better. To lead in building a more peaceful and prosperous society based on our shared brotherhood, rather than focusing on our individual differences. To unite, when others try to divide. To foster hope when others urge hate. To work among yourselves, to work with your neighbors through Belgium, or America, or with your neighbors in Europe, with your fellow world citizens to build that more peaceful, cleaner and prosperous planet.

This group has that wonderful opportunity because you are already citizens of the world. You are from Macedonia, Albania, Canada, Turkey, Germany, America and more. You have lived among Flemish and Walloons. You have witnessed the honor of military service. The love of a faculty. You are at home not just with people of your neighborhood, but with people of your planet. And what's more, I know you. I have seen the respect and the love you show for each other. You are all ambassadors among people of the World, between East and West and between the past and the future. By your actions, by your words, you have the ability to build a better future and a better world.

How you help build that better future for yourselves and for us all, how you correct the mistakes of my generation is easy to describe, but admittedly harder to achieve. The range of possible contributions is quite broad. At a minimum, all of you can foster that new world by studying hard, getting a steady job, joining the community while always preserving your identity, and being a productive member of our planet in practice. You can simply by your actions be a role model for others. We have choices in life – every one of us – we can either be part of the problem, or part of the solution.

Some can perhaps do far more. Become an advocate for mutual understanding, for social progress, for a world of shared justice and mutual respect. You can not only be part of the solution, you can shape that solution, indeed you can lead it.

But isn't it hard? Can we really do it? It takes work, but the truth is that that is in some respects the easiest and certainly most fun path.

Surely that is easy for me to say. What does an American ambassador know about real people? About high school kids? About mothers who want to work two jobs to support their families but cannot find one? What does a fancy lawyer know about real life competition? About challenges, about discrimination and prejudice?

Well, I know a story of a boy whose father was an illegal immigrant. When his father came West, the father did not speak a word of the local language. The boy lived in a 2 bedroom, 1 bathroom apartment that he shared with his sister, his parents and his grandmother. His father died when the boy was 16, causing the boy to take public transportation home from high school for an hour and a half and then go to work after school cleaning tables in a restaurant and washing dishes.

I know that the boy studied hard, excelled in public school and waited tables every weekend to pay for college. And again, he studied hard and graduated at the top of his class to become the first one in the neighborhood ever to go to Harvard Law School. And I know that that boy became a leading lawyer and an advisor to Governors, Senators and even Presidents. He became an Ambassador.

Of course, that boy was me. But it could well be you. Every one of you.

And we all know the story of a black kid born into a country where parts of the country did not let black folks ride on the bus, or use the same bathrooms. He grew up without a dad, raised often by grandparents. We know that boy studied hard and became a professor. But he understood people – he inspired all regardless of race or background. Is the next Barack Obama at this graduation?

And if algebra and trigonometry begin to frazzle your brain, if military service, college and graduate school need not be the only route to personal success and social contribution. I know florists and farmers, mechanics and so much more, who give back so much more than they take. Who support families and friends and leave the planet a far better place than they found it.

Belgium and Europe offer some amazing opportunities and present some difficult challenges. I have met minority leaders of every stripe in governments across Belgium. And every one of you can attend Leuven or Louvain-la-Neuve or any of the many wonderful universities for free. So wash some dishes, wash some cars, sell waffles, while you walk into the future.

There are difficult challenges. Hazardous traps lie along every step. First, as long as there are two people on this planet who differ, racial prejudice will always exist. But it never prospers. Be better than it. There will be peer pressure-to hate others; to take easy way outs. And sometimes those peers in narrow worlds may look like they do prosper. Broaden your sites and it is apparent that hate, indifference, laziness or illegality, are just tools to protect the ego of those who can never truly succeed.

There are pressures all around. The high road always leads right over them. You have seen the best of the planet's diversity. Teach others to celebrate our diversity while adding to the greater good of the society in which you live. Study language: English, French, and Flemish. Volunteer to teach others.

And always smile.

All the best.