

Summit of Cultures

May 9, 2012

"Summit of Cultures" event in Molenbeek
Ambassador Howard Gutman

Ik heb zoveel respect voor de schoonheid van uw taal, dat ik niets meer ga zeggen in het Nederlands.

Et mon français est très mauvais aussi. J'étudie le français un jour et le néerlandais le lendemain cinq jours par semaine. Mais je ne suis pas un bon élève... et je continuerai donc en anglais.

When I saw the memo from my embassy telling me about today's event, I knew this was the most important speech I would make in Belgium. I have been here nearly three years and have made speeches in front of the King and Queen, the entire cabinet, business leaders of all kinds. I have had private meetings with President Obama in the White House and even with Prince Charles of England. But I knew this would be the most important gathering. 260 high school students, representing 30 different nationalities, from multicultural schools throughout Brussels. Ambassadors can speak to Presidents and Prime ministers, Kings and Princes . . . but how often does an Ambassador get to speak to the future of our planet? It is an honor and a joy to be here tonight and to get to speak with the future of our planet.

The future of our planet does not come in one color; it does not belong to one gender; it is not and cannot be controlled by my generation. The future of our planet comes in black and white and brown and every shade in between; it wears pants and skirts; and it well understands that ipads are more important than pens. It is a future rich in its cultural diversity.

I have been drawn to the promise of that diversity ever since I first arrived in Belgium almost 3 years ago. My very first speech was in Charleroi – in Charleroi, you can visit the past but also meet the diversity that holds the promise for our future. I have hosted three fabulous Iftars in my home to celebrate Ramadan with many of our Muslim friends; I have hosted seders with Jewish friends; and Christmas dinners with Christian friends. I have visited mosques and synagogues and churches all over Belgium. A couple of years ago, we held a big event at the Community Center in Molenbeek with the actors from the movie FAME.

And last year, I participated in the "One Star, One Destiny" project at the Athénée Royal Serge Creuz, right here in Molenbeek. And I can tell you, that visit is one of the highlights of my time here in Belgium. I have been to a lot of places in Belgium! As soon as I arrived here, I pledged to visit each and every one of Belgium's 589 communes. I have been to 437 thus far and have seen amazing things – beautiful towns, historic sites, carnivals and festivals that celebrate folkloric traditions. I have met royalty, ministers, members of government, captains of industry, and famous sports stars. Yet I have never received a more heartwarming and emotional welcome than the one I got from the boys and girls at Serge Creuz, when they greeted me with smiles, and hands on hearts, sang the American and Belgian national anthems. That is a memory I will cherish forever. I would urge you to go on youtube and see it for yourself, and then send it to a friend. Together that day, and together this day, we are building the future for us all.

Indeed, you are the leaders of tomorrow. All in this room could change the planet. When a black kid from Hawaii who grew up in Indonesia can lead the free world, certainly a student from Molenbeek or Anderlecht or Ixelles or Woluwe or Saint Gilles or Forest - can do so as well. Is the next Barack Obama in this room? How can't he or she be?

We have a future to build together. And 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. And we have to get it right together, as one, as neighbors, as citizens and as friends.

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?

This group – from schools throughout Brussels, right in this room – has a unique 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 other urge hate. To work among yourselves, to work with your neighbors through Belgium, with your neighbors in Europe, with your fellow world citizens in Morocco, Turkey, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Tunisia, Israel, Canada, China, the United States, and the rest of the globe to build that more peaceful and prosperous planet.

This group has that unique opportunity because you have roots in regions around the globe, and many in the East, and you live together in the West. By spanning many cultures and by bridging from an old generation to a new one, 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.

Everyone in this room is a citizen of the world. As such, you have limitless opportunities, but also obligations. You have the obligation to do your best to understand your neighbor, your country, and your world. You must understand your history and our collective history to understand your future and our collective future.

To do that, you should do your best to learn the languages of your region, of your country and as much as possible of the world. Each of you is blessed to live in a bilingual country and with a great deal of English all around as well. And many of you also speak yet another language at home.

All of you can foster a better future and a better world by studying hard, getting a steady job, joining the community while always preserving your identity, and being a productive member of our society 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.

Surely that is easy for me to say. What does an American ambassador know about mothers who want to work two jobs to support their families but cannot find one? What does a fancy lawyer from Washington D.C. know about discrimination and prejudice? About knocking on doors that no one wants to answer?

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

That boy is me. But it could well be you. Every one of you.

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.

And university is not the only route to personal success and social contribution. I know florists and farmers, mechanics and military, 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. Each one of you has a unique contribution to make.

But there are difficult challenges, too. Hazardous traps await at every step. First, as long as there are two people on this planet who differ, racial prejudice will always exist. But it never prospers. Rise above it. And don't give in to peer pressure to hate others just because they are different from you. If you look closely, you'll see that we are much more alike than we are different. We just have to go beyond stereotypes.

Teach others to celebrate our diversity while adding to the greater good of the society in which you live. Make friends with people from other backgrounds. Share your cultural traditions and learn about theirs. Study language: English, French, and Dutch. Volunteer to teach others. And wash some dishes along the way.

Thanks so much and all the best.