

Live Life For Real

By Richard K. Herrmann

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President Gee, Members of the Board of Trustees, Colleagues, graduates, parents and friends, it is great honor to address you today.

Congratulations to all of you graduating. Given the world we face, our community needs people with broad ranging knowledge and important skills and in Ohio only one person in four graduates from college, only one in ten with an advanced degree. You have made your dream of graduating real and as Jesse Owens, said: *"making dreams come into reality takes an awful lot of determination, dedication, self-discipline and effort."* He was right, and all of us are proud of you.

I'm proud of being chair the political science department but if you don't mind, I'm going to pass up this opportunity to tell you what I think about the political system, after all, I study international relations not hand-to-hand combat. I can't pass up, however, this chance to say thank you to Ohio State and to the people of Ohio. Randall Ripley, the person who first hired me is on stage today. Who knows where my career would have gone if he hadn't? Over the years, Ohio State has given me the chance to have my say, travel all over the world, and spend most of my time amongst the most exciting intellectual firepower imaginable. OSU's hospitals brought my two sons into the world and the doctors at the James Cancer

Institute fought on my side not once but twice so I could stay in it with them. There is not a day that I walk across the Oval that I'm not grateful. I thank all of you who see Ohio State as yours and support it so generously.

When I graduated from Cleveland Heights High school, I don't think I'd ever met a professor. I didn't have the slightest inkling I'd like to be one. Heading into graduate school, my teachers told me one advantage of being a professor is that you always feel 25 because of the age of those around you. Well, I've been 25 for more than 30 years now and, it turns out, that the great thing about students is not their age but their perspective; their enthusiasm for getting started and making a difference, their optimism that they are the ones that are going to solve the problems we couldn't, and their confidence that they are the ones who are going to resolve the conflicts that divided us and cost the world so dearly.

It is wonderful to live in the incubator we call a university. Today, however, you are on the launching pad. It is time to go do those things for real. That's exciting, of course, but it also can be a bit nerve-wracking. After all, there are a lot of questions still unanswered. Will I succeed in my first job? Maybe, when will I get it? How is my career going to turn out? Will I like what I'm doing? How's my love life going to pan out? How about children?

I suppose at major starting points in life, it might be nice to have a crystal ball to tell us what to do and what to avoid. There isn't one, so I usually give students the same

advice my teacher gave me; follow your heart, do what makes you happy, and you'll do it so well that things will work out. Sometimes, I repeat what Mark Twain said, "*Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore.*" Over the years upon hearing all of this, students tell me they get it, they're on their way, determined to soar, but nevertheless, ask as they head out the door, if I'm sure it wouldn't be better if they just had a map.

Well, maps are nice, they tell us where things are. But they don't tell us where we want to go or how we want to get there. Deciding what you want is up to you and figuring out how to find it is what will motivate you for a lifetime. If it helps any, keep in mind that the world needs so many different things from so many different kinds of people that there are a million good ways to go. In fact, my message this afternoon is a simple one, it is don't get so worried about trying to predict the future that you forget that it depends on a lot on you, how you learn from the things you try, and then live your life afterward.

I started my career writing about the Soviet Union and its involvement in the Middle East. In 1985, a professor at the Max Plank Institute in Germany asked me to join a group of Americans that he wanted to have meet with a group of Russians. It turned out that we met every summer for quite a few years and on more than a few nights shared our predictions for how things would change as Mikhail Gorbachev consolidated power. A number of us went on to serve in government and give advice based on those

predictions. Needless to say, it didn't always turn out as we expected, but what I learned was that even though politicians say all sorts of stuff with great confidence as they try to persuade you, among serious people trying to get it right almost nobody believes in fortunetellers. They know the stakes are too high for that. They value people who have the courage to place their bets, but value even more highly those who read the feedback accurately and quickly and know how to respond. I suppose it's similar to what they'd want from a coach who can see how the game is developing and adjust wisely in the second half.

As my focus shifted from prediction to learning, I got interested in what the burgeoning fields of decision sciences and behavioral economics were finding with regard to how people updated their thinking. The biases they found in business and medicine were evident in foreign policy too. People overreacted to setbacks, too often concluding, if only they had just done the opposite of what they did it would have turned out better, and people learned too little from success, figuring it was whatever they did that caused it, and, in neither case, did they look hard enough at the combination of things actually producing the outcome.

People, it turns out, are also pretty poor statisticians. They don't pay enough attention to the frequency with which things actually happen and pay too much attention to vivid and emotionally charged information. This distorts their calculation of the odds. In politics, of course, this is bonanza for fear mongers because by playing to it, they can direct attention to where they want money spent rather than to the problems that do the

most harm. We can see that in how much attention we pay to terrorism compared to the preventable diseases that actually kill vastly more people each year.

As important as it is to keep an eye on base rates, when you are dealing with human relationships, statistics don't determine the outcome, people do and they have a way of thinking for themselves. They are learning too. Winston Churchill once said, "*a nation has no permanent enemies and no permanent friends, only permanent interests.*" I'm not so sure even their interests are permanent. When I was in graduate school, the revolution in Iran brought to power people who had fundamentally different conceptions of what was in their country's interest. Then when I was in the government, I met with Russians who were rethinking in very basic ways what Russia's national interests were. In these cases, just as we see today in the Arab world and the United States too, confident claims that history determined what they had to think or that the structure of power in the world left them no choice, failed to account for how many different points of view there were inside these countries. I've found it makes better sense to listen carefully to what various people in these countries tell me they think their interest are and to watch closely how as a group they decide what to do. Across the years, I also learned that betting against change is not always the smart move.

I often hear people despair that political conflicts are so deeply rooted in human nature that learning is unlikely to change them. It is easy to see amazing change in technology and medicine but it is not obvious that progress like that has been made in improving political and social relationships. I wouldn't be in the business if I was

pessimistic on this score, and, we can all see that cancer has proved stubborn too and nobody's giving up there. Where learning from history is different is that as we watch it unfold we can't isolate a single factor, hold everything else constant, and rerun the experiment a 1,000 times. This makes it harder to establish exactly what causes what. We might hope this would breed humility and open-mindedness but it just as often produces an inordinate faith in ideology. In study after study of Americans, we find that among the more knowledgeable people the ideological differences are wider and more intense. It is as if ideology shapes the meaning of the new information they acquire which is not the best recipe for learning.

The English Enlightenment Philosopher, John Locke wrote centuries ago "*All men are liable to error; and most men are, in many points, by passion or interest, under temptation to it.*" Maybe here with regard to motivated biases is where learning in the political world is the most different. People may get so frustrated with a disease they are ready to punch the wall, but usually not somebody else in the nose. In politics it's different. As Socrates said, "*From the deepest desires often comes the deadliest hate.*" I have spent most of my adult life studying the Middle East and certainly can't argue with Socrates here, and as my wife of 37 years can probably attest I'm hardly immune. Sometimes it just feels good to rant. Letting that sort of romantic and ill-considered thinking guide you, however, is very dangerous and horribly costly. Psychologists find that anger shuts down our ability to learn and even if you find stereotypes emotionally satisfying, they rarely capture the reality of who and what you are dealing with. They may lead Hollywood to success at the box office but are

unlikely to help you realize your dreams.

Victor Hugo suggested that each of us “*should frame life so that at some future hour fact and [our] dreaming meet.*” What I’ve tried to say this afternoon is that predictable mistakes we make in learning coupled with ideological rigidity and emotionally based wishful thinking get in the way of doing that. I’d advise letting your dreams relentlessly energize your open-minded search for the best ways to achieve them and as you learn, adjust your course accordingly.

There is no crystal ball that can assure you it will always work out, but even if there were, would you really want to know? Did you ever record the game and then have somebody spoil it for you by telling you the score? It’s the anticipation, the planning, the fear and the hopes that make life thrilling. There won’t only be triumphs, but when we’re lucky, even in heartbreaks, we nevertheless cherish the people who were with us, helped us endure, and put the wind back in our sails. As the ancient Greek general Pericles said, “*what you leave behind is not what is engraved in stone monuments, but what is woven into the lives of others.*” So live life for real.

The famous poet Cavafy wrote of the journey to Ithaka, that destination wherever and whatever it is that you dream of today. He closes this way. So will I.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind

Arriving there is what you’re destined for.

But don't hurry the journey at all.

Better if it last for years.

So you're old by the time you reach the island.

Wealthy with all you've gained on the way.

Not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.

Without her you wouldn't have set out.

She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.

Wise as you will have become, so full of experience.

You'll have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.