

IMSA 2019 Convocation Speech

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Thank you to President Torres, Principal Hernandez, and other guests. Students, classes of 20, 21, 22, I'm very excited to be here with you.

I think I'm going to begin with a confession. All good speeches begin with confessions, don't they? When I was invited to speak this year at convocation I was very excited and honored but honestly also apprehensive. Typically, convocation speeches by alumni involve a bit of reminiscing and a bit of advice. But as many of my friends - and certainly my family who are here know - my long-term memory is not so great. And never has been. This is not a matter of age. It has always been that way. I like to say I was born an absent-minded professor.

So I reached out two of my closest IMSA friends, Mike Tae and Liv Gjestvang, class of 1993 (Mike was a *shmen* - do we still have those?), and asked them to help jog my memory. I think what I actually said was - "ummm ... so *what happened* in high school?! Please remind me!"

And they indulged me. They reminded that I had lived in 1504. They reminded me of our senior year camping trip of which incriminating photos still pop up from time to time. They reminded me of our silly inside jokes. Liv, who was my roommate for two of my years here, reminded me of the hours spent in our dorm rooms listening to the Smiths and Sarah McLaughlin. She also reminded me of her practice of throwing shoes at the bathroom door because I would sit in there and talk on the phone endlessly.

My friends reminded me that my high school uniform was Keds, stone-washed jeans, a white t-shirt and flannel shirt over it. The 90s – grunge was in. They reminded me that I once decided it would be really cool to wear paper clips as earrings. And, honestly, as these two conversations went on, I began to appreciate the benefits of a shoddy long term memory! (pause)

But my friend Mike said two things that have stayed with me. One was that, well, I was far more passionate about my humanities and philosophy courses when I was here than my science and math classes (no surprise and that's ok). And he also said something else – he said *"I really didn't know anything about life in high school but I knew you really well and, knowing what I know now, you are exactly where you were meant to be"*.

It's funny because we spend a lot of time thinking about all the ways that we change and we do change so much! So many things will happen in your lives, so many things will happen to you this year, and for those of you going to college next year, you will experience very dramatic changes.

And those of us who have been through some portion of these changes, *just love* telling those of you who haven't, how much you'll change. But the truth is – I think on a general level at least, I can summarize for you in less than two minutes the next 40 years of your professional life. Shall I try?

Most of you will spend your 20s – hopefully having some fun – but, frankly, also in a state of anxiety and stress because you will be trying to get somewhere. Some of you won't know where exactly, others will, but you'll still be trying to get "there",

wherever "there" is. You'll wonder sometimes why you aren't being given a chance to prove that you can be the thing you are trying to be, you may be frustrated at the barriers, blocks and detours, you may compare your progress to others or wonder why the path isn't clearer. But no matter what, you will spend your 20s in the anxious act of becoming.

Then in your 30s you'll have supposedly "arrived", at least at the initial stages of the place you were going. You'll look around and think "why are people trusting me to be this?" "Does everyone else also feel like an imposter here?" I'm just keep my head down and fake it till I make it. All the while you will be honing your expertise.

Then your 40s. Those are the best. Because by then, you're pretty much there and you have been doing whatever you do long enough that you realize that it is now unlikely someone is going to come into your office and say, "hey how did you get in here?! Get out!" So, in your 40s, when someone hands you a microphone and says speak, you think to yourself, "well, maybe someone else could do a better job... but I'm the one standing here so ok - pass it on over!"

Now that's as far as I can speak from personal experience but I hear your 50s are fantastic. Because you actually do know more than everyone else in the room and you're no longer worried about the consequences of saying so. There you are. Forty years of your life and a lot to look forward to.

But that's actually not what I wanted to talk to you about today. What I want to share with you is what I realized in speaking to Mike. And that is this: that despite all of these

changes, we are all, in essence, ourselves at every age. At IMSA, I was a version of the person before you now. You are going to change yes, but you are you in a way that is important and fundamental.

And I want to talk to *that you*. I want to talk to the timeless you. The one that exists now and may be standing at this podium in 20 years.

I want to tell that you about two of my memories while at IMSA and I swear these are mine. These were not handed to me by friends. But two memories that stayed with me and have heavily impacted how I think about the world, how I relate to it, the things that I care about and the work that I do now.

The first was a story I read in a class, Utopia Anti-Utopia. The story, by Ursula LeGuin, is called *The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas*. It's about a town in which life is perfect and ideal. The citizens have plenty to eat. They have shelter. They are kind to each other and there is time for relaxation and play. Life is lovely except for one small hitch – at some point in their young adult hood (your age), each person is taken to a dark, secret place where they are shown a child who has been placed in a life of deprivation, isolation and torture. This child, they are meant to understand, is the price the community pays to continue to exist in its idealistic state. One child living in misery, against everyone else's happiness.

Now when each citizen of the village is exposed to this truth, they have one of two reactions. Most people – go back to their lives and enjoy the idealistic existence they have grown accustomed to and try to forget what they've seen. But others,

far fewer, walk away from that town because they can't live with the knowledge of the suffering of one child even if it is in exchange for the happiness of the rest of the community.

I remember finding the story disturbing and sad but also very disorienting. Clearly, the overall good was benefitted by this arrangement. A community where people took care of each other and were happy and peaceful and only one person suffered in exchange.

The part of my brain that was used to thinking about how to maximize the good was satisfied but I also knew something was very off. You've likely been asked already— or you will be — to think about this question —it preoccupies social contract and utilitarian philosophy — the question of whether and how much the few — the minority — can be made to sacrifice in exchange for the majority or "the greater good". And it is a choice made by policymakers, business leaders, doctors and judges on a regular basis.

My second memory is from a series of lectures that took place during my time here at IMSA. Between 1991 -1993, Maya Angelou, Carl Sagan and Edward Teller came to campus speak with students. I remember Teller's visit particularly well. For those of you who don't know, Teller was involved in the development of hydrogen bomb and I think it's fair to say he is a controversial figure. I remember being part of a group of students discussing with him the interactions of policy, morality and science. Teller came to talk to us about the unfettered pursuit of technologies/accumulation of knowledge and the separate decision about how to apply them.

You have all grown up with this debate swirling around you and the well-accepted reality that we might create something for one purpose but it might come to satisfy another. The internet itself. The amazon echo that orders my groceries and tells my daughter jokes can also spy on me. The programs that collect and use data about my income level and geographic location can tell Trunk Club my likely style preferences saving me a shopping trip but can also tell a political party how I will vote and how to influence my political choices. Facebook is both the platform that many are weary of and that may have allowed the Russians to influence our elections but it also allowed an activist in Vietnam to organize support for her release from prison after she criticized the governments' environmental policies.

It seems actually that nearly every step humans take - especially now as our abilities have expanded into new and undreamed of directions - we are faced with a central question in all of these contexts. How the individual - the I - you and me - the components of society, interact with and are valued by the group - the community- the US.

In other words, and more directly, what are the costs we are willing to impose on the individual for the good of the community? And the question that follows - on what basis do we make decisions about the use of scientific advancements or resource allocations in light of the, sometimes, competing benefits and harms to the individual and society.

Let me give you some examples:

I just came back from Cambodia where I was doing research on the issue of gestational surrogacy. Gestational surrogacy is where a

woman becomes pregnant with and gives birth to a child through the process of IVF – the child is genetically unconnected to the surrogate. This medical advancement has opened up the possibility for many to have children – same-sex couples, infertile couples, women have decided to have children later in life. It is also arguably an exercise of a woman's reproductive right to decide how to use her reproductive capacity. It has also, however, opened up a new environment with the potential for exploitation. Women in poorer countries are increasingly serving as surrogates because costs are lower and there is higher economic need. Economic vulnerability and lack of regulation – inadequate medical care, absence of a functional legal system to enforce contracts all create the potential for harm. So what should countries do? Ban it, regulate it, let the market determine what happens – Interests and rights must be in balance.

A second example is our immigration and border regulation policies. The debate has been fierce in the last few years – border walls, prosecutions, detentions, separation of families and most recently the exclusion of asylum seekers US territory. The right to asylum – once considered a framework so accepted, one of the most fundamental humanitarian agreements, that countries could never avoid it. And yet, they are, Germany, UK, the US. Countries must be able to regulate immigration – who comes in and out and under what circumstances. And we have the capacity to build walls, create disincentives, surveil people, deport them, detain them. But how far are we willing to go to keep people out? And what are our obligations to those that make it in, even if they do so by breaking our rules? Do immigrants, even illegal ones, have rights that must be balanced with our interest in regulating our borders?

As I see it, to approach these problems, we must do so upon a foundation of how to think about the individual in reference to the group – without these we lose our way. This is the aim of the human rights system. To provide a mechanism for thinking about the individual – and what rights are guaranteed to the individual that cannot be taken away or, if they are restricted, done so in a careful, measured and justified way. All policies and all questions about how to use our technologies and capabilities must be responsive to some understanding of the rights of the individual against the benefits of the group.

This question and the ones that generate from it are alive and present and they are before all of us with huge implications – how we answer them can represent one direction for humanity or another. They are your questions and they are my questions. They are the questions for the ***timeless, ever present, part of us.***

Which brings me to why I want to say all of this to this particular group of people.

The thing, I think, that makes this place so special and why those two experiences stand out to me after all this time – is the way IMSA and the educational environment it provided me allowed me to process them.

This institution, even twenty years into its existence, remains such a young and ambitious project – its dual goals of education and contribution. Your families all sacrificed to send you here. You've heard that too many times by now. But, as a parent, I know now what it would mean to give up three years with your

child. It is no small thing and I am grateful my parents were willing, sometimes grudgingly, to make that sacrifice.

What it is doing for each of you, the very model of education IMSA gifts each student with is to enable you all to enter the world as agents.

By virtue of having been here, you are NOT passive receivers of knowledge but agents, actors in the world.

You will ALL be doers and thinkers.

Some of you will be creators & innovators,

Others healers, peacemakers & mediators.

Some objectors, disruptors, & instigators.

Some of you will just be straight up trouble-makers, the administration probably knows who you are already. But bless you, we need you. I'm mother to one and it is wonderful.

With agency comes an ability - both a foundation and a capacity - to play a role in making thoughtful, informed and empathic decisions about the direction of our communities, of defining the scope of community and our obligations to each individual within community.

It starts here with IMSA's mission - to learn, educate and contribute.

I don't want to terrify you. But I do want you to take these

questions, the projects of humanity and adopt them, own them and answer them. I want you, ***the timeless you*** - a group of immensely talented people - to explore them here and to share what you learn with the country and the world. In your one, two, three years remaining, be those agents, soak in what is given to you, allow yourself to be catapulted forward through this education and then join us in answering the questions of our time. (pause)

And for each of you - I hope - though you may be a slightly different version ***of the timeless you*** when you are in your 40s, that one day you are on the phone with one of the very treasured friends you've made here and he or she will be saying to you -- *that you are exactly where you were meant to be.*

Thank you.