

Mr. Vice-Chancellor, Platform party guests, Faculty and Staff, Members of the Graduating Class, Parents and Families, Ladies and Gentlemen: Thank you very much. It's a great honor to be here, sharing with all of you my reflections about the work we have done together.

Graduating from the university is a fundamental rite of passage, one for which there is a before and an after. Now it's up to each one of you, members of the graduating class, to go out there and develop your career, contribute to the community, perhaps raise a family or continue raising a family. It's going to be exciting and fulfilling, but also difficult, because this world of ours is very complex and contradictory, perhaps more than ever before. And what makes our world different from the way it was before is, I think, globalization, a process fueled by the unprecedented speed of communications and represented by its clearest metaphor, the internet. So, I like to extend this metaphor: *It's as if, today, graduating from the university, you powered up your computers, opened Internet Explorer and started browsing.*

It sounds so exciting! With a few clicks, we can explore foreign cultures, other professions, texts, pictures, music, movies, blogs... and so on. Many of those links could represent real paths, real life alternatives for many of us. But there is a catch. As of today, and although nobody knows the exact number, there are more than 240 million websites on the internet. 240 million. The number of webpages is certainly much bigger, with Google now reporting more than a trillion. (Yes, a trillion.) It's clear that navigating an almost infinite space such as this poses some problems; living in the hyperlinked world that is mirrored by these trillion webpages poses many problems. We may ask, for instance: if the world changes so much and so fast, if the world offers us so many alternatives, how can we choose what to do? How can we choose whether to live and work here or there? How can we choose whether to devote our time to one activity or another? In a context that is so dynamic, in short, how can we make long-term decisions for ourselves and our loved ones?

The other problem is the apparent ease of internet browsing. This fast and effortless navigation, just a few clicks away on the Google window, may make it more difficult for us to achieve depth. This is because we still have the same bodies, the same brains and the same emotions as our ancestors who lived in caves, 50,000 years ago. Casual internet browsing—and by this I mean staying on a page just for a few seconds, and then moving on to another—is way too fast for us to internalize any new knowledge; real thinking and real feeling take a much longer time.

This is why I am at peace about your studies at St Thomas, because here you had the chance to sit back and reflect. Throughout your degree, when you took different courses, you browsed through topics, disciplines, and teachers, yes, like in Google, but with a depth that could only be provided by the old-fashioned classroom, that special place where we are prompted, not only to think, but to think together, debating concepts with our peers and instructors. I hope that this habit of shared reflection will stay with you and help you navigate this new stage of your life.

As Director of Fine Arts, I am also happy about the involvement of many of you with the Fine Arts Program while at St Thomas. Maybe you had a chance to listen to an opera by Mozart or critically examined a heavy metal song, or carefully looked at a painting by Pablo Picasso or a sculpture by Vladimir Tatlin. Visiting these special pages of human experience that we call the Fine Arts gives us all a rare opportunity to learn about ourselves as people: what we want, what we fear, the dilemmas we face.

No matter the technology surrounding us or the different languages we may speak, art and music often give us some of those elusive answers that we all need to go on. For instance, how to explain the rise and fall of shining-star politicians, like Bill Clinton or Silvio Berlusconi, or sporting stars

such as Michael Phelps, or great artists such as Judy Garland or Michael Jackson. Their ups and downs are less surprising once we get to know a few operatic heroes, or pay attention to stories in old folk songs, or look at a fresco from the Renaissance. Art and music teach us about men and women with the potential to do wonderful things, but who are also fallible and ambivalent, like all of us. Understanding their desires and their dilemmas is important, because sooner or later, one way or another, we all face equivalent ones.

The Fine Arts also give us an opportunity to experience a different way of manipulating matter, sound, and space. Many of you touched and molded things like clay and paint and paper, or held an instrument and played music, or tapped rhythms and danced around a room. These non-verbal protocols tell a story in a way that words can't. Artistic practice enriches our lives because it gives us a different way to experience reality. The problem is that the more the technology advances, the less able we become to actually do things with our hands. Soon typing at the computer will be completely replaced by voice commands; in a generation or two, writing on a piece of paper will be once again the exclusive knowledge of specialists, like in Ancient Egypt or Imperial China. Nowadays, paradoxically, as our computers store more songs than any person could hear in a lifetime, and our electronic audio devices grow ever more sophisticated, individuals have fewer reasons to experience the joy of *making* music, and very few people are able to read music. As we see, given the wrong conditions, whether by accident or on purpose, technology can also propel ignorance. So, if you took Fine Arts courses at St Thomas, drawing, painting, playing an instrument, or singing in the choir, I hope that this experience will stay with you, safe from the pressures of contemporary life. I also hope that you'll remember it at the time to educate others, or when you raise your children.

Today is the day to face the future. And even if nowadays the world changes so fast, we do know a few things about the future. We know that scientific and technological advances will continue, and that our civilization will be ever more connected, creating incredible opportunities that once belonged only in the realm of science fiction. But together with this, and in part because of this, the survival of our species will be seriously challenged, in a number of ways. My short list includes climate change, nuclear proliferation, scarcity of water and other essential natural resources, inequality accessing education and public health, and plenty of social, economic and cultural clashes that will require peaceful conflict resolution, around the planet. The stakes couldn't be higher, for extinction of the human species would be the alternative. This is the world we have inherited. This is the imperfect world in which you are graduating today. But this is also the exciting world that waits for you to make a difference. Welcome to the adventure.

Thank you.

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