Class Address: Robert Lynch

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The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts

In December of 1950, when William Faulkner was accepting the Nobel Prize for Literature, the world was a very different place than the one we live in today.

Europe and Asia were rebuilding after the costliest conflict in all of human history. The iron curtain had been lowered, establishing a bipolar world order international politics. Discrimination along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, and religion were common even in our most developed societies. And the threat of nuclear annihilation was new, widespread, and real.

When he was accepting his prize, Faulkner remarked on this, describing the great existential question of humankind at this time as being nothing more than “when will I be blown up?”

But he rejected this question, remarking, “I refuse to accept the end of mankind, for we will not merely endure, but we will prevail.”

63.5 years later, and the fate of humanity has changed significantly for the better. Modern communication technologies have brought human communities closer together, giving public voices to the once unheard and misrepresented. Scientific advancements have allowed us to better understand our place in the universe, cure previously thought incurable diseases, and provide much of humankind with lives of comfort, security, and convenience.

Increased democratization and liberalization have brought prosperity and stability to billions of people. Violence and warfare, while still very much a part of our human condition, are as rare as any time in recorded history. Educational and economic opportunities are available to populations that, just a generation ago, would never have considered the idea of “upward mobility.”

This truly is an incredible time to be alive; to enjoy what our planet and its thousands of human communities have to offer. As we have for the entirety of our existence, even in the face of fatalism and worrying, humanity has endured. Humanity has prevailed.
When speaking to the Nobel Banquet in Stockholm, Faulkner remarked that we are capable of creating a better future for ourselves through our inexhaustible human spirit – a spirit capable of compassion, humility, and sacrifice.

These are traits which I have seen this class exhibit in ways I could not have imagined.

Take, for example, compassion, the fuel of our Fletcher community. Whether it be someone offering a shoulder to lean on after Professor Jacque’s Corporate Finance final, or someone devoting themselves to studying Development Economics or Humanitarian Assistance. It could be students spending their summers in Nepal to study child labor, or raising money to benefit local NGOs.

It isn’t the New England weather or the Medford nightlife that has brought us here – trust me on that one – but rather it is our compassion for humankind and the unwavering optimism that things can be better that moved us to this institution.

Along with compassion, comes humility, the ability to understand that your reality is not someone else’s reality, to know that our worldviews are shaped by so many circumstances which are beyond our control or not of our own doing, and admitting that, oftentimes, the most accurate answer to a difficult question is simply “I don’t know.” The issues we study – human security, international economics, law and development – require both thinkers and practitioners capable of understanding multiple perspectives and offering analyses and decisions free from bias or prejudice. Without humility, and its inherit curiosity, we would not be the question-asking, problem-solving idealists we fashion ourselves to be.

And then there is the willingness to sacrifice that equips us to take the risks necessary to guarantee the continued success of humanity. We at Fletcher have made a whole manner of sacrifices, and taken risks big and small, in pursuit of our goals – and, no, I’m not just speaking about sacrificing a few Friday nights in Ginn Library to finish your Capstone projects. Many of us, for example, took a bit of leap of faith in coming here in the first place, sacrificing stable jobs or careers in pursuit of a passion or, simply, something new here at Tufts. Some of you have sacrificed significant capital and time to launch a small business or
promote a startup. Many of you, even, have served or continue to serve your nation’s armed forces, sacrificing not only your time and energy, but also your security, to protect your friends, family, and homes.

These capabilities – of compassion, humility, and sacrifice – are why so many of us will be in positions to make difficult decisions, to perform in the service of others, and to solve seemingly insolvable problems.

Indeed, just as our predecessors were faced with a myriad of challenges over which they were able to prevail, we too are confronting an array of unforeseen obstacles to human progress in the 21st Century.

As Dr. Rajiv Shah, the Administrator of the US Agency for International Development, reminded us yesterday, technology and better governance has brought billions of people worldwide out of poverty. But billions more still live with hunger, fear, and sickness as daily realities. The world order of international institutions and norms is threatened by instable or failed governments in places such as Crimea, west Africa, and the Middle East. And the growing human population puts an increasing strain on our planet and its limited resources, causing us to wonder how, if we cannot provide food, shelter, and security to seven billion people, how exactly are we going to do it for eight, nine, or ten?

These challenges are prescient and real, but they are not insurmountable. They will take optimists, idealists, innovators, and dreamers working together – and not apart – to overcome, but they will not mark the end of mankind.

You, and those like you, will be at the forefront of our future. I know this, because I know Fletcher. I have seen in Fletcher, every day that I have been so lucky to have been here, the capabilities for compassion, humility, and sacrifice, which mark the inexhaustible and unflappable human spirit.

It is the same spirit that ended doubt and doomsaying, and has created an unbroken thread throughout our history, connecting our efforts of the future with the successes of the past.

And, Fletcher, the Class of 2014, I know that you, through your inexhaustible human spirit, will not merely endure, but you will prevail.