Alumni Greeting: Paulo Bilyk (F92)
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Class Day Ceremony, May 18, 2013
The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

There was once a man (reputed to be the wisest in the world) who, although living to an untold age, confined his teaching to the one command: ‘Endure!’ At length a rival arose who challenged him to a debate which took place before a large assembly, ‘You say "Endure", cried his competitor, ‘but I don’t want to endure. I wish to love and to be loved, to conquer and create, I wish to know what is right, then do it and be happy’. There was no reply from his opponent, and, on looking more closely at the old creature, his adversary found him to consist of an odd-shaped rock on which had taken root a battered thorn that represented, by an optical illusion, the impression of hair and a beard. Triumphantly he pointed out the mistake to the authorities but they were not intimidated. ‘Man or rock’, they answered, ‘does it really matter?’ And at that moment the wind, reverberating through the sage’s moss-grown orifice, repeated with a hollow sound: ‘Endure!’

--From The Unquiet Grave by Cyril Connely as Palinurus

Do you know the web site LibraryThing? As you register your books into LibraryThing it tells you some fun stuff like which other members of the system around the world have collections most like yours. That and a world of connections to blogs and literary events and whatnot plus, and here is what matters, it gives you a list of 5 books other members suggest that you should read and a list of 5 books that its own algorithm prints out based on your interests and collection. And something scary happened. A same single book kept propping up in both suggestion lists, more and more often as we registered more and more of my collection: The Unquiet Grave by Palinurus. It so happened that a friend had not long ago lent me a copy of this very book saying I would surely appreciate it. Which at first I did not, very particular in style and full of strange connections between ideas as it was. You do not really know who the author is nor what he truly intends so you must trust the text and plod forward until you start making the associations which bring out the beauty and the wisdom of the "word cycle" which is what the book calls itself. It is a book for those of us on this side of the tent, up on the stage, and for the parents of you graduates - but I explicitly forbid you to open its pages before you approach 50. It is too egotistical and bizarre for appreciation in the 20s and it generates the kind of unease that resonates with the inquiries that only readers with a sense of a life that is passing and perhaps closing should indulge in.

Spookily, Big Data knows everything about us - possibly more than we even think we do. Pay attention to this, which is how I had written the opening of this speech before giving Palinurus his due time:
Persevere! If I had the guts and I could get away with it in Churchillian style, this is straight and simple what my exhortation to you today would be. I would then step down from this pulpit, robe flowing, and be confident I had contributed to your future by stressing a feature of life which is unglamorous and yet determines so much of what really gets done for the better or the worse. I truly believe it. Now, that will not do, of course. I am not Churchill and Medford is not as close to São Paulo as Harrow is to Chartwell. I have a tad more to prove and we all want to get more out of the buck this trip has cost us.

So here I am in front of a Dell computer in my home office in São Paulo in the year 2013. I wrote my MALD on an IBM PS2 which had the newest Intel 386 processor inside, back in the years 1991 and 1992. From my Dell computer - and please note there are 3 such computers in my home, plus 2 Ipads and 3 Iphones -- I can access the world wide web and its infinite resources (at the cost of my privacy of course). No such thing was even conceivable to us in 1992. My IBM was a stand-alone machine, plumped on top of a handsome custom made maple-wood desk I had bought off Professor Cohen - then a charismatic and much liked economics teacher who left Medford for California and the pleasures of life in Santa Barbara. Mostly a computer was a word processor and an electronic spreadsheet, no more. If I remember well it put me back some US$ 3 thousand which at current inflation corrected prices would amount to some US$ 5 thousand. We had mail boxes in a corridor right in Mugar Hall where we would pick up our paper envelopes that bore stamps from our homes in Cameroon, India, China, Cleveland, California, the Maldives, Pakistan, Germany, Venezuela, Thailand, Canada, Florida, Mexico, South Africa, Japan, Bangladesh and who knows where else. Us foreigners were mesmerized at the speed with which we could get a telephone installed and operating without any upfront payments in each and every dorm room. I cannot remember anyone thinking of the existence of mobile phones.

Back to São Paulo. Before I began typing this text I stuck my I Phone into the speaker and CD system I have in my home office to get it charged overnight and ready to sweat it out the whole day tomorrow. Perchance it automatically started to play music that I have downloaded into it and what I am now hearing is a very contemporary, somewhat atonal piano composition executed by a young Brazilian, Fabio Martino. He is 22 years old and now studies in Germany (Karlsruhe), which is an opportunity my wife and I were able to afford to offer him thanks to the fact that we now earn and have saved more than we need and desire to spend on keeping our family safe and materially satisfied. I have always been close to music and musicians - my mother’s family includes some splendid amateur guitar players and my father’s family is Polish. Whilst at Fletcher I actually studied the flute at the Tufts Music Department with Nina Barwell and got to play for fun in internal recitals here on campus. I cannot play an instrument any way near the quality I can appreciate and even evaluate music, so I have settled for a life as a reader, a listener and a promoter of talent in this art. How very typical of a student at this most resourceful, multidisciplinary and, dare I say it?, romantic school of law and diplomacy. And yet like Iberian conversos we must keep this our little secret: never ever underestimate the risk of losing your focus in this world of continuous demands for outperformance. As a Fletcher grad you know just what that means because you have spoken to recruitment officers and to your boyfriend’s parents who are doubtful of the veritable utility of all this generality. "What degree is this you are
studying for after all? Lots of history classes but you’re not a historian. Lots of law classes but you’re not a lawyer. Economics and not an economist. Diplomacy, you say?. The job of the inquisition is to inquire! But, you will also understand, this drive is one we cannot control. So music and young musicians are in my blood as a myriad of other pursuits are certainly in yours - "we can do no other." As you grow older and more professionally established you will see it is alright to come out with our secret of broad intellectual curiosity. You will feel emancipated and might even be surprised at how much you may be respected and even admired for the contributions you will make to your workplace because of this secret drive for knowledge across borders.

Which is why I suspect that many of you here have more than one, or two or three ideas of what kind of work you could be involved in. I know the condition. Having studied mostly international economics, diplomatic history and the connections between science and international relations, I interned at the UNDP in Mexico City and was hired for a permanent position at their Lesotho office. Until I got a message on my answering machine in our second year flat on Powderhouse Boulevard. Lo and behold, I landed most unexpectedly in finance back in the Brazil from where I had come. It is such a peculiar and improbable story, that for respect of your time, I can I only describe in person if you care to inquire. But so it was that in the decade of the 1990s, when Brazil in its always unpredictable way moved gradually towards stabilization (after a decade of hyperinflation and general economic mayhem), I found myself in a vortex of business opportunities that made the most of the very kind of person I had become as a young adult just out of Fletcher: confident, risk taking, international, ambitious, flexible and hardworking. All that and more competent at writing than anyone else in the company.

If there is a single talent I believe this school was especially qualified at developing at my time here, it was writing properly. I trust it is true today as well. It was at Fletcher that I was introduced to the relevance of the quality of sources - primary and secondary. And it was here as well that I had my conclusions most severely scrutinized by fellow students in discussions and professors in papers. Right here I learned to think with discipline, to discern with rigor and to speculate with humility. Of course, I never got as far as creating knowledge - that is a task for the PhD students I suppose - but I came out of this school quite eager to tackle complex, interdisciplinary, time constrained problems. And I could put things down on paper in clear, convincing and even somewhat stylish fashion. Of all the people here today, it is to Professor Alan Henrikson that I owe the greatest debt of recognition for my having developed this Fletcherite skill. For our generation he personified the dedication and true love of teaching that makes this place so very, very special. A small class somewhere in a corner of a cozy building, with a few students from many different places. Professor Henrikson spent time on our papers and offered detailed advice on the development of ideas, wording, spelling, punctuation and the correct form of footnoting. I take him as an emblem for which this whole place stands. I must also remember Professor Ernest May at Harvard and Professor Sylvan Schweber from Brandeis with whom I studied in those Fletcher School days – oh, the splendid freedom of building our courses along the wildest pursuits - who like professor Henrikson taught us to write concisely, clearly, interestingly and truthfully.
Less is more. Restraint in the use of adjectives and adverbs. From particular to universal. From punctuation to meaning. From sources to conclusions. From individual decisions to national developments. Prudence through your work. From Medford to the world.

Here a quick interruption in my train of thought for a curious list of the topics that mattered at my time at Fletcher 20 odd years ago: the inevitability of Japanese world dominance; the wonder of German unification and its increasing clout; the early warnings of global warming; Operation Desert Storm; the new Russia and its chaotic entry into capitalism. A curious list of topics that did not matter: the world wide web, the inevitability of Chinese world dominance, Brazil. End of interruption.

Now I must move towards some kind of closure. The trouble is that when writing a speech like this I feel the burden of conjuring something which epitomizes all that matters on this day. But what could I possibly pontificate to graduates who are 21 years younger than me on average? We have never even spoken about your ambitions, curiosities, concerns, personalities, limitations. Worse still: what does graduation even mean in a day of ubiquitous information, fluid concepts of what careers mean, multiplicity of accreditation possibilities? Besides, Dr Seuss and Rudyard Kipling have already had the ultimate word on all this.

Here I must state my bias: I am married to a serious, studious psychiatrist and I couldn’t possibly commit the sin of prescribing anything to a group as large, varied and unknown in detail to me as this without being irresponsible or pompous or outright ridiculous. This I must not do. However, I can be truthful without suggesting in any way to be irresponsibly, pompously or ridiculously universal.

The first truth is that I am close to 50. Like you I was about 27 when I sat on one of those chairs under this tent here in front of Blakeley. Where you are stepping out into the apparently infinite world of possibilities, tanned, rested and ready (let’s just leave the saying as it is!), I am stepping for a few moments back into your world and momentarily away from the front of battle where charges are led, trenches are dug, negotiations are held and everywhere abounds a feeling that (a) we must conquer as much as we possibly can and (b) this must be done with great expediency, time being of the essence. It would not surprise me if you feel that is an appropriate description for a good part of life here in the academic world as well. We have consolidated a culture that equates success with prosperity acquired through unbound ambition in most spheres in the world. In my experience I have only seen this get more intense as time goes by.

Another truth is that I have been tempted throughout my professional life with nearly every vice you can imagine. Just picture what it was to experience the accelerated growth of the investment banking sector in the 1990s and 2000s, think about Brazil being a country where republican institutions are still under construction, think about the power you can concentrate through the accumulation of wealth in a developing nation, think about the endless potential of being associated with governments in countries where governments intensely regulate, sponsor and finance business activity. Think about what it
takes to grow from young analyst to senior partner in a very individualistic profit hungry environment. Life as a fully independent adult, will leave little room for excuses - and if you want to be outstanding at what you do then you must be ready to take on a heavy load of moral responsibility for your actions and those of the people that work with you. If you are a soldier then I can imagine that all this is quite clear and present. It might be suggestive too for those who have felt the heat and the pressure of life on Wall Street. Also for those who know the pushing and shoving of building a career in the foreign service. But I am certain the same doubts are part of a job in teaching, in development and, having recently read a selection of letters by Thomas Merton, feel this is true of monastery life as well. Temptation is everywhere.

But my very big personal truth for you today is this: two sources of moral conduct served as my permanent guides through swamps of time constrained decision making in the battle to achieve and prosper in the professional world: first was the fact that I was a Bilyk, "Can I live with this decision and know that one day my family will be associated with it? Is it up to par with the decisions made by my Polish grandfather in Lwow in 1939, my father's life as a young prisoner of war and penniless émigré to Brazil? My mother's catholic Swiss family in Lausanne and their trust in the inherent virtues of education? My children's heritage?" Second was the fact that I was an alumnus of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy. "Will my act make this school proud? Will I be seen as worthy of the history of public service - an idealistic sense of dedication to the public good - that generations of academics and alumni here at our school have built?" I carry an image of our buildings in my mind. I remember an already retired Professor William Barnes - an anthological figure in our history in international law - taking me to see hockey games in Boston and introducing me to the clubs and the tastes of this city's Brahmins. His eyes and his gravelly voice are still here, exuding kindness and personal interest in me. I have a deep feeling about what it means to have been a student here discussing ideas, bibliographies, exams and course schedules with professors in their offices. Professor Perry leading my oral examination in the Murrow Room. I remember the smell of the stacks in the reading room in the library. I remember the color of the lockers and the sound they made when opening and shutting. This jumbled repertory suggests and nudges me always to what is right and what is wrong. Sounds impossible, strange and mystical - this is a romantic school, remember? - but you will know what I mean, believe me.

Yet, I have erred and would place a bet that you too shall one day or other. However I trust you will seriously contemplate your missteps, you will seek to mature into a person of ever greater trustworthiness, respect for others and the physical world we live in, dedication to the public good and an ever healthier sense of the importance of boundaries and constraints in every human endeavor. At very many times you will feel that living by these standards puts you at odds with what brings about apparent success as you see it blossoming around you - material success most especially, but fame a close second -- true.

The news I bring to you today is that this little school to which you bid physical farewell expects more than scholarly competence, technical expertise, intellectual curiosity and hard work from us all. It expects us to be moral beings of high standing. Wherever and forever. Endure!