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Commencement Ceremony, May 19, 2013
The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University

Thank you, Lulu, for your kind words. Thank you to the Fletcher Student Council and Fletcher 2013 graduates, for this great and surprising honor. So surprising, in fact, that I confess when I received an email from Lulu informing me that I was selected by the students to receive the Paddock Prize, my reply to her was along the lines of: Ha, ha. Very funny Fletcher Follies prank, Lulu. [And Lulu has sent me some pretty funny emails over the last two years.] Luckily, before I clicked Send and completely embarrassed myself, I received another email from Executive Associate Dean Jerry Sheehan explaining the prize. So I quickly deleted the unsent email. But now of course you all know.

I am honored beyond words.

Though, I did manage to find a few words for you today.

As intimidating as it is to stand up and address all of you in the presence of my esteemed colleagues, and the trustees of Fletcher, and your families, I was not daunted. For as many of you know, my greatest talent as a teacher, and undoubtedly the reason you have awarded me this great honor that requires I address you thus today, is my ability to choose the world’s greatest teaching assistants. (We will ignore for the moment that at Fletcher it is hard to go wrong on this task, given the pool of greatness from which I choose.) And yet, my VATA’s (I call them this because they are Very Amazing) for the first time, failed me. They did not write a draft of this address for me. They did one thing though. They told me to be myself, as I am in class. So they think I should be inappropriate and mean. Therefore, if this address causes you pain, Beau, Kate, Dinar and Tara will be holding office hours in the tent after the ceremony. By the bar.

My very first day at the Fletcher School, new students who were just beginning their first year, shocked me by coming to my then very out-of-the-way office to welcome me to Fletcher! Immediately they taught me the meaning of community at Fletcher. And I have been learning volumes from my students ever since. They taught me about Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert. More recently one of you graduating today taught me about Homeland. And since the lovely email you sent me with congratulations on this great honor of the Paddock Prize, I do now forgive you for initiating that new addiction / I mean distraction.

My students taught me that you can dress up as a decision tree for Halloween. That there is a drinking game about me – but they will not tell me anything about it. Because, they say, it is a secret....

Also, you taught me about courage. The students from Afghanistan whose transitions to Medford and our education system were rocky, at best. The doctor who faced beatings and
death threats. The student who led others on her campus to protest against a falsified election, only to be jailed and then sentenced in absentia while she was already studying here. The students who grew up in the midst of war, and now work to help rebuild and ensure human security. The Tavitian fellows from Armenia who leave their families including small children for six months to learn ways to lead their country to a better future. The students who stand in the Hall of Flags with signs declaring Free Hug Day. Along with many others.

The most valuable thing you, my students, have taught me is hope. And you have become the greatest source of my hope for the world. When I began teaching at Fletcher the world seemed bleak to me – with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that seemed endless. You inspire hope in me because of your commitment, for the great ideas you have and your goals, for what you want to achieve, for how you want to improve the world.

When you tell me your ideas, and allow me to help you formulate your approaches in your classwork, your papers, your theses, your plans for the future, you inspire hope in me. If a small fraction of you accomplish a small fraction of what you describe to me on a daily basis, there will be true improvements in the world. For me, it is a great honor just to be part of this, and to help in the small way that I can. And, of course, to forever take credit for all that you accomplish.

You have challenged me throughout your time here. And before leaving, you challenge me once again. It is not easy to impart words of wisdom on you before you leave, particularly as you already know most of those things often said in commencement addresses:

“You must make your own way.”
You know that. You have been doing that already.

“It will not be easy.”
You know that as well.

So my words for you must be just for you. Just for Fletcher students – unique for both what you have done before you came to us and what you will do after you leave.

First: though you leave us today, do not begin your great work tomorrow. Spend today basking in the glow of what you have achieved. Then spend tomorrow resting, and taking deep breaths. The next day, begin. But remember to take those deep breaths and to rest when you can. You will need your energy, your strength, and an inner calm, for all the big challenges that come. And this ties to my second point, one I have tried to make repeatedly but at Fletcher often seems to fall on deaf ears –

Despite what some of you have believed at choice times, I make a point of not subjecting you to any more torture than necessary. I firmly believe in inflicting only the necessary amount of torture, and not one bit more. And this is when you bring in your own forms of torture – making things harder for yourselves than they truly are. Please remember, the world is hard enough. It is important to recognize when something that can be achieved relatively easily. Save your greater efforts for those things that require herculean strength. You know they are coming. While here you learned that efficiency is one of several criteria
for policy decisions. It should also be a criterion for your own decisions. Efficiency, remember, is getting the most possible from the resources you have. Whereas the limits for most people do not apply to you, as you are far from ordinary, you are in fact human. Despite the evidence to the contrary you have provided at times, you are human, and you must respect your ultimately human limitations. Do not mistake this as a plea for mediocrity or resignation of falling short of your objectives. On the contrary, I beseech you to maximize your accomplishments, to achieve your goals and more, by respecting your innate vulnerabilities. Do not push yourself beyond reason to illness. Seek help when you need it. This will enable you to create the most benefit from your natural endowments.

I began this year telling some of you that I had an epiphany, and that I was certain that the secret of life is rooted somehow in probability theory. While I have not worked out the details of this yet, my 3rd point is that you must also respect uncertainty. This is often the thing that will make what you do hard. This is often what makes us throw up our hands and say – but who knows what will happen? But there is so much uncertainty, we cannot predict! And yet, we must move forward and make decisions all the same. And while you have been here you have been arming yourselves with tools to do this. And we, your faculty, have been helping to guide you in this arming. If you doubt that you are ready for this, replace that doubt with the knowledge that we, your teachers, do not. You will walk off this stage today with our almighty seal of approval. You will hold it as you shake Dean Bosworth’s hand. You will be ready. You will continue to learn from everything you do. And do not forget that often there are things you can do to change the probability of events.

On the last day in my class, when we think back on the hard decisions we discussed, and you admit your relief that you yourselves were not the ones on the line to have to make those decisions, I say: if not you, then who? And when you think of the alternatives – of who else it may be making those hard decisions - you come to that conclusion as well. And it is a brutal conclusion, to know that you are on the line to make decisions with potentially epic consequences. And yet in class I beseech you to remember your value added and to embrace your place at the table and be sure your voice is heard in that decision.

Today, however, I take this message further. I tell you that your courage and conviction must keep you true to this commitment you have made. The commitment you made when you came to Fletcher, here educating and preparing yourselves, each in your own way. You must step up. That is why you are here. And that is why I am here, and my colleagues on the faculty. We teach you, we push you, we advise you, we edit you, we mentor you, and we send you off with our prayers and our hope for your accomplishments, and our faith in the goodness that your contribution to the world will be.

Fletcher commencement is always bittersweet for me. I cherish the opportunity to celebrate your accomplishments while here and those anticipated for the future. Yet there is always that sadness of seeing you leave, knowing I will miss each of you. All the more, this year, as we say farewell to our esteemed Dean and Academic Dean. While one of my colleagues who sits on the admissions committee kindly reminded me the other day that we have another extraordinary class making their way here in September, you have been
special to me. You have shown such personal kindness and humanity, in addition to the intelligence and talent we are so accustomed to seeing at Fletcher.

Now I will close by sharing with you two of my favorite quotes, both from A. A. Milne. In my usual fashion, I will use the first to tell you what to do, and the second to tell you how to do it

(1) “Think, think, think!”

(2) “If ever there is tomorrow when we’re not together... there is something you must always remember. You are braver than you believe, stronger than you seem, and smarter than you think.”

We believe in you and your potential. We look forward to hearing from you as you go and pursue your careers, your goals and your lives. And we honor you today, as you graduate and begin the next phase of your life.

Again, Thank you, and Congratulations.