

Geneva Graduate Institute, Graduation Ceremony, September 2024

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Dear parents, dear colleagues and friends, ladies and gentlemen and first and foremost dear students and soon to be graduates, good morning/afternoon to all of you and a warm welcome to the graduate institute and to the Maison de la Paix, whether in person or online. Bienvenu à toutes et à tous. C'est un grand plaisir pour moi, pour nous tous, de vous voir si nombreux aujourd'hui que ce soit dans cet amphithéâtre ou en ligne.

Dear students – as you walk out of this room in a couple of hours you will enter a new stage in your life. It is not quite like going through the looking glass but finishing a course of study means crossing an important threshold. You have made it. You have gone through and fulfilled all the requirements of a demanding program and of this you should be proud. I think you should give yourselves a huge round of applause.

In Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, when she meets the Cheschire cat, she asks him – *“Would you tell me please, which way I ought to go from here?”* The cat answers: *“that depends a good deal on where you want to get to”*.... Alice goes on to answer: *“I don't much care where, so long as I get somewhere”*... and the cat answers *“oh you are sure to do that, if only you walk long enough”*.

May be you feel a bit like Alice today Or may-be not and you know exactly where you want to go. But even if you feel that you know exactly where you want to go ... don't take it too seriously. Keep some of that Alice in wonderland spirit because as they say... life is what happens when you are busy making other plans.

Just like the cat, I will not give you any advice on the path to take. Just like the cat I will subtly avoid even trying But what I would like to do is say a few words about the spirit in which it might make sense to undertake whatever journey lies ahead of you, whatever path you end up taking or clearing for yourself.

A first important component of that spirit should be *gratitude*. Our achievements are never only ours... all along our life, the support, the resources, the competences, the knowledge, the friendship or the love others have given and shared with us, play a huge role. Please join me dear graduates in applauding all those towards whom you feel grateful today, your families naturally,

whether they are physically here today or not, but also your professors, your colleagues and your friends.

A second important component of that spirit should be *curiosity*... I know that we sometimes say that curiosity kills the cat... but it does not kill Alice, quite to the contrary. Curiosity is the motor of life... it is what makes us grow, what makes us learn, what brings us elsewhere and enriches us, what allows us to choose or to create the path we had never thought about before. Curiosity is at the core of what humanity and life are all about. Albert Einstein, in *The World as I See It*, a book he published in 1934, said it quite powerfully. I quote:

If someone can no longer feel wonder or surprise, he is a living dead and his eyes are now blind. It works with she too!

We have to realize though that keeping our curiosity alive is not so easy in the world we live in. In fact, there is much in our world which is about taming our curiosity. Hence, we do have to fight if we want to keep it alive.

A third constitutive component of the spirit of the journey is closely connected to curiosity. And this is *critical thinking* – the capacity to always question what we believe and what we think we know. Let us be clear – critical thinking should also be constructive. Critical thinking is about fragilizing existing convictions and solutions but with a view to construct better ones, more adapted to the challenges and risks that confront us. During the years you spent at the institute, your critical thinking capabilities have been fostered in a number of ways:

- First, simply through the rich diversity that you represent as a community of more than a hundred nationalities – this place is a fascinating concentrate of the kaleidoscopic nature of our world. Such a diverse community makes it imperative to learn to deeply listen to each other, to negotiate, to navigate, to knead and render malleable one's own perspectives.
- Second, critical thinking has been fostered through a pedagogy defined by transdisciplinarity and debate
- And it also comes through the interplay which is available on a daily basis within the walls of the institute between theoretical thinking on the one hand and exchanges around the dynamics of practice on the other.

A fourth important structuring component of the spirit of the journey should be *courage*. The world ahead, we know, is a complex, uncertain, risky one – ripe with many threats some of those threats being sometimes described as existential. The territories you are entering are uncharted and not only to you but in fact to all of us. It is a bit as if we were moving from the lake to a wild open and unpredictable ocean. Fear or courage are two options here – but fear leads nowhere

so courage is the only option. Let me read on this some lines from a beautiful text by the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran, a text called *Fear*:

“It is said that before entering the sea a river trembles with fear. She looks back at the path she has traveled and in front of her she sees an ocean so vast, that to enter there seems nothing more than to disappear forever. But there is no other way. The river cannot go back... the river needs to take the risk of entering the ocean because only then will fear disappear, because that’s where the river will know it is not about disappearing into the ocean but of becoming the ocean”.

Finally, the last component I would add is *benevolence*. To be benevolent is to look out for others, to actively demonstrate a positive concern for others. These days, the word benevolence and the practices associated with it tend to be out of fashion – in today’s fiercely competitive world, benevolence can be viewed as a sign of naivety, of weakness and vulnerability – and possibly as a barrier to success. But to the contrary. Anthropologists tell us that togetherness is a fundamental part of what it means to be human. And that our ability to cooperate and to look out for each other has been critical to our resilience as a species. Cooperation is impossible without at least some degree of mutual recognition, without that elusive yet powerful sense of a shared existence and of mutual dependence. Benevolence is the glue that binds us together. And it also helps make life a more bearable and less violent experience. In their book *Order out of Chaos*, chemist Ilya Prigogine and philosopher Isabelle Stengers stress that the more complex, chaotic and uncertain the world becomes, the more we need sanctuaries of safety and stability. Being benevolent, being kind to one another, and to other inhabitants of our planet, is one way we can create spaces of safety, stability and well-being.

As I am coming to the end of the few words I wanted to say today, let me express my huge and heartfelt thank you to the professors and to the teams at the institute that have been there throughout your course of study and even more pointedly to all those who have worked hard to make today possible. Please join me in thanking them all!

To all of you, dear students, I wish the very best for the next stage of your lives – may your journey be as fulfilling and rewarding as possible, with many professional achievements as well as many personal joys.