

American Studies Center, University of Warsaw

2018 Commencement Speech

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When I was asked to deliver the commencement speech during the Center's inaugural ceremony, I first said to myself "great, right on! I just need to talk!" And then, even though I have often been, quite accurately I think, described in the following words: "If he's alive, he's talking," I thought some more about this and said "oh, boy!" And then I thought even more and said something else to myself that I cannot possibly repeat here for the risk of breaching the occasion's decorum – but I was scared. And then, finally, I started googling because I had never delivered a commencement speech in my life and if you knew how many I had read or watched, you would, well, I have no idea what you would do. But I read and watched more than is good for me, so if today I fail to leave with you at least one idea worthy of remembering, blame the internets. Always blame the internets. (By the way, they say "once a teacher, always a teacher," so I have hidden several Easter eggs in my speech: quotations and phrases from American culture, mostly books. Not that you're being tested, but you know, in the spirit of healthy revision...)

So, let me start with this: the harsh truth is that your final BA paper or your MA thesis does not really matter. I mean it does not matter as an outcome that runs for x number of pages with layout and footnotes and bibliography. In a year, you will not be able to recite its title by heart. In two years, your memory of exactly which texts or concepts you discussed in it will become somewhat blurry. In five years, at that Friday night party, you will have to work hard to remember what topic you had – although that may also be thanks to that Friday night party being, well, a Friday night party. And even if you

choose an academic career, your BA or MA thesis will never really matter, either, and the chance that somebody will ever ask you what it was on is pretty slim. You will be judged and evaluated with different criteria. (Until the time, at least, when you become a professor and over beers you will feel this overwhelming need to enlighten your own graduate students where you started. So, let me tell you about my own MA thesis ...) So, anyway, why write it if it doesn't matter? And, more generally, what exactly is the value of these – depending on how long you have spent with us – two, three, or five years?

Your thesis may not matter that much, but things you have done to arrive at it do, be they technical, such as organizing your notes or doing research, or intellectual, such as learning all this fascinating, crazy, perplexing stuff about American history, culture, and society. A college degree is one of those deals where it's not the destination that matters. The road is where it's at. The 80 pages of your thesis may not change your life, but how you got to these 80 pages – and pretty much everything else you did during these years with us – does. All of this does matter and it has equipped you with certain skills and knowledge for the rest of your life. And the rest of your life is a very long time.

So let me suggest to you how it matters. Or how it *may* matter. And since I have spent the last twenty-five years dealing in speculation and simulation (see, this is me trying to avoid saying “science fiction” and “video games” at a serious ceremony), I will ask you to look at three hypothetical snapshots, three possible versions of a future in which things you did at 22 Aleja Niepodległości translate into something more than grades. Each next is slightly longer than the previous one, but, hey, there are only three. None of them is better, more preferable, or nobler than the other two. And, of course, there are really many more than just these three scenarios, but I only have fifteen minutes or so. So.

One. First of all, knowing more about the United States than anyone else is just cool. Just think about it. Whether we like it or not, the global culture has been centrally shaped by products and ideas originating in the western hemisphere. Hollywood rules the multiplexes, there is a good chance that at least half of your favorite artists in any medium are American, half of the things you own may be American-branded (although they weren't necessarily made in the U.S.), and a great deal of business, science, and technology connects in one way or another to the United States. In a world like that, knowing so much that is related to the United States (or, more broadly, Americas) has got to be useful. I don't want to tell you that explaining the exact causes of the Great Depression or the religious diversity of the original colonies is a great party line, but these things, however impractical they may seem to be, make you a better person. Contrary to what Facebook memes say, there is no useless knowledge. There are only people who don't know how to use it. But, if you still need suggestions for those great party lines, how about enlightening your listeners about why exactly we have observed dramatic fluctuations of tequila prices or being able to tell them the meaning of all these cultural references in *Stranger Things*, that quirky television show from two years ago? You know these things, if anyone does. Sometimes, ironically, better than on the day of the exam.

Two. Within academia, we like to say that the last few decades have not been kind for the humanities. Business and STEM is apparently where the money goes, where the consequential research lives, and where careers are built. These narratives of doom and gloom may not always be entirely accurate, but, certainly, the prospects of your cultural studies degree may not always seem so rosy. And yet, journalists and CEOs keep

reminding us that a humanities degree will serve you well in an economy, digital or not, that is disruptive and in which the event horizon of unpredictability has shifted close to the now-and-here. Foundational skills such as coordination, social perceptiveness, active listening, and complex problem-solving are highly valued in a global order in which people, products, services, information, and ideas flow seemingly without obstruction.

Technical experts are important, of course, but the big world of money, trade, and mobility needs people who grasp the why's and how's of human behavior, who detect social distinctions in societies which, we are told, become ever more global and homogenous, and who can tell stories about the nuts and bolts of its doings. Tracing the complexities of urban development in major American metropolises goes beyond essay topics and holds keys to understanding both the United States and our own society.

Watching *The Wire* will tell you more about race than three years' worth of evening news. Knowing the difference between the second and third wave of American feminism amounts to much more than the historical idiosyncrasies of a political movement. These facts, these knowledges, can and do translate into practical actions and decisions. This is where you come in with your knowledge that no degree in law, economics, and engineering will ever give other students.

So, in a corporate boardroom, during a strategic meeting, or simply around a watercooler in the kitchenette, you will be the one to point out some unexamined assumption that everyone else has overlooked even though, boy, they certainly have their Excel spreadsheets sewn up tight. Sure, the oft-used story about Chevrolet Nova selling poorly in Spanish-language countries because its name phonetically translated into "no go" is an urban myth, but the point of this fake cautionary tale quoted so often

in marketing handbooks remains not an inch less valid. Apart from a few examples, conceptual leaps and revelatory insights in state and corporate bureaucracies come not from super-trained specialists but from the outside. You are the outside.

Three. We live in a world in which information does not just permeate our lives. It gushes into our lives and floods us and rises ever higher: books, newspapers, magazines, blogs, podcasts, YouTube clips, Twitter tweets, and news reports, and radio, and television with fifty-seven channels (and nothin' on), and – ah! – those Facebook comment flame wars! But, wait, I am not going to tell you that novels are better than blogs. That television is more serious than Twitter. That reading is more enlightening than watching. Whatever its form and shape, we wallow in data and the more data we have, the stronger the desire in us to make sense of it all. And so we look for commonalities, construct overarching interpretations, arrange our knowledge in systems defined by integrity and consistency. After all, it all has to make sense, right?

This foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. Our world is furiously, hellishly, hopelessly (or perhaps, hopefully?), perplexingly complex. Way way beyond our systemic and systematic understanding. It cannot be contained within a single narrative. It has never been black and white, binary, Manichean. Sure, there are a few universal truths (like, for instance, that the third season of *Twin Peaks* is the best 18 hours of television ever made), but most things and events and facts and situations are grey and blurred and contingent. That, we find very hard to accept and again and again we fall prey to opinions accepted from authority, fake news, clickbait links, alternative facts, Twitter bots, quotations lifted out of their context, and reposts of reposts of reposts whose original authors cannot be even identified. If anyone is, you are equipped to

navigate these worlds of the sound and the fury. You can (although I am so tempted to say “should”) tell people that things are almost always more complicated, that there is more to situations that seem simple at first, that often there is no clear solution or explanation or causality.

This also means that you have to live with these complexities and contradictions yourselves. As many of you probably know, the gold standard of college commencement speeches is David Foster Wallace’s “This is Water,” which he presented to the 2005 graduating class at Kenyon College in Ohio and whose brilliance, compassion, and sadness will always haunt everyone who has to present a commencement speech, myself included. But can I continue to revere Wallace and his words now that we know he had his own #MeToo incident and that he was not in a position that I would like him to be in? Can I stand here before you, all of you brilliant women, and mention his name and tell you about life lessons in “This is Water”?

I have no answer to this question but I know I have to talk about it and present its conundrum to others. Whether or not you will ever find yourselves in any kind of teaching position, our program has hopefully equipped you with the capacity to ask such questions. To complicate the world. To throw a spanner in the works of simplifying, reducing, limiting the world. You may call it critical thinking. Or cautious suspicion of any information and opinion. Or being a troublemaker. But you have the tools to cultivate this mindset, because it is a mindset, not just an attitude or opinion.

And let me tell you, this will not make your lives easier. You don’t get brownies for asking difficult questions that fly in the face of your co-workers’ and friends’ deeply

cherished convictions. Being a “yes, but ...” person is sometimes, often, almost always, an unthankful task and it consumes time and it takes a toll on you. It sometimes makes you angry when people refuse to question their assumptions. Other times it makes you sad, because with seeing and feeling comes sadness. But this is the price we have to pay for refusing to generalize, to surf the surface, to toe the line. And you have to be watchful, too. None of this means you know better or that you are in possession of this elusive word starting with “t” – Truth. We need to question everything, but we need to do that with love and compassion and humble belief that we do so not to uplift our precious egos but to make our families, workplaces, and social spaces better, even if by so little.

Remember that fake story about Chevrolet Nova I just mentioned a few minutes ago? Ever wondered how come it has been reprinted so often in marketing handbooks and used again and again in business degree programs and no one, not a single person, has actually bothered to verify it? You can be that person. You *are* that person.

These three little inklings are, naturally, mere shorthand for infinitely many situations in your lives in which you may find yourselves and discover that you can, in fact, draw on the knowledge from *Aleja Niepodległości*. I am not going to tell you that one of these is your obligation or your destiny or your duty. Your only duty is to collect experiences and to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life. And if you can make the world a slightly better place in the process, your children, or your friends’ children, will thank you for it. Or not. But you still must live deep. Go now. That life starts now.