

A Transcript of Merriconeag Waldorf High School Graduation Remarks
By Jonathan Moore, June 11th 2011

Good afternoon. I am excited to be with you all on this wonderful day. It is a privilege for me and I thank you for my being here.

In the early days of the popular uprising in Egypt, a demonstrator in Tahrir Square, in Cairo, a forty-year-old electrician from Alexandria, exclaimed: “All I cared about before was making a living, but now people have started to care about each other. I feel like I have been born again!” Another surprised and elated revolutionary, a citizen of Adabaneya, Tunisia, observed: “The crisis gives a real sense of unity.”

Hearing these voices brought two thoughts to mind. These brave resisters not only were fighting to throw off entrenched dictatorship and oppression, but in so doing, in the midst of their ancient differences and separations, they were discovering solidarity and caring which stemmed from mobilization in common cause, for mutual interest. And I recognized this was something U.S. politics lacked right now — a sense of unanimity and consensus characteristic of societies which are committed to inclusiveness and accommodation, and which are seeking some cohesive whole by respecting the opinions and addressing the needs of its various parts. Not factionalism, negativism, division, polarization. And not by giving up individual and group rights and freedom. But comity, not anomie.

Yet we know the challenges that face nations in the Middle East are scary indeed, given the continuing intra-state conflicts and impending regional instability, and the stubborn refusal of some to give up their autocratic, medieval entrenchments. The best a few others can hope for are long, fragile, arduous transitions toward more democratic governance with no good end yet in sight.

The whole globalizing world is in sorry shape. Part of our perception, or mine, we should recognize, is distorted by the popularity of bad news and its multiplication and exaggeration, and there is much progress and improvement in people's lives across the planet which we may be less aware of. I do not want to dwell on bad news, but I do want to ensure that we do not deny the reality of our troubles to the extent that we undermine our commitment and capacity to deal with them.

Aside from ethnic and sectarian conflict and geo-political tension abroad, there is a confluence of new forces of sweeping power and stamina which are loose in the globe and not subject to effective antidote for defense, involving, for example: climate change, nuclear proliferation, disease, and above all, the widening rich-poor gap — which compounds all of the other threats.

Problems, or liabilities, here at home to my mind include: apprehension and avoidance in our polity in the face of the increasing complexity and uncertain future of our lives, the reliance on ideological arrogance instead of pragmatic idealism, the rise of the moneyarchy and decline of egalitarian society.

What can we, should we want to, do about these demons and predicaments? How do we awaken in ourselves, but collectively, Lincoln's "better angels of our nature"? Are they there? Can we prove Joseph Conrad's faith that "the Dark Powers whose real terrors, always on the verge of triumph, are perpetually foiled by the steadfastness of men"?

Speaking for myself — and uncertain as to what will happen, but with lots of resolve and energy, I have a few small ideas, culminating in a single bigger one; and then a personal reference as to one way we might spend our time trying to put them to use.

We need to be careful about the truth we perceive and be sure to allow for the truth that we do not know. We need to understand the challenges we face in their true proportions, not downsize them to the level we find politically tolerable and at which we are willing to address them. In many cases, we need not approach complex problems in terms of determining “solutions” that we in fact do not have the capacity or the leverage to achieve; but rather pursue strategies which while inspired by ideals will wrestle possibility out of complexity, and reflect a discipline not to try to accomplish too much too soon. Sometimes enduring rather than prevailing, at least for a time. Which brings up the need for us to consider the passage and use of time in the long run and not in demanding immediate, short-term success which seldom exists. Everything is going to take a long, long time; some difficulties are virtually permanent, requiring patient and persistent management rather than the illusion of “transformation.” We are living in a radically different world than we have been accustomed to, and change in our attitude and behavior — challenging the traditional “can do” and exceptionalist assumptions of Americans — is needed for us to survive in it.

Here is the single, bigger idea I promised: Empathy. Respecting, connecting with, caring for others. Defining our own self-interest to include serving the interests of others. Not pursuing winning but cooperation. The great thing about this idea, ideal, virtue is that it’s doable — everyone could do it, every nation, institution, political party, and individual, and if everyone did do it, there would be a transformation. This is, of course, a profoundly moral commitment. It is also simultaneously a very pragmatic, very political one. And we must learn better to inject our morality into our politics instead of leaving them separate, with our politics bare and our highest ideals left aside as a rhetorical lament.

My own suggestion as to where we might best put our aspirations into practice, what venue or platform of effort — I guess I'm talking to some extent about "careers"— stems unsurprisingly from my own experience. (Of course our celebrated friends here, the graduating seniors, have a special advantage in this choice: putting it off. Four years of "higher" liberal arts education to enjoy and prepare. Do put it off, take your time, use the opportunity to nurture your moral imagination and your commitment to creativity and your art.)

In my case, the choice was public service. Of course one can be a public servant, indeed must be, in many different ways and places, apart from the formal, official association with the public service, as in government. And the best way I can share my own dedication and excitement with you about trying to serve the public is to tell you about a few of the extraordinary people I ran into, and examples of what we worked on, laughed on, laughed about, and struggled with across that course. I am using their true names.

David Martin was U.S. Senator Leverett Saltonstall's Legislative Assistant in the late 1950's. He was about to be fired, or "let go" as the Yankees preferred to say it then, and although I didn't know it at first, I was slated to replace him. David had been working on a truly extraordinary project for Saltonstall and his colleague, then Senator Jack Kennedy — the creation of the Cape Cod National Seashore, the first national park established in a region already developed, populated and incorporated into townships. When I replaced him, he went on working on the project — for me! This was not normally a good way to start a relationship. But his natural generosity of spirit, ebullience and dedication for this environmental breakthrough made it easy. He tutored me in all the ground already covered and guided me in the work ahead. We became partners, he refining the legislation and I working the politics on Capitol Hill. To

him, what was important was to get the job done and while doing so use the opportunity to build a deep life-long friendship. The Seashore was signed into law on August 7, 1961.

In 1967, George Romney, Governor of Michigan, decided to run for the Republican nomination for President (the same precarious situation his son, Mitt Romney, now finds himself in). He signed me on as his foreign policy adviser for the campaign. I took the job, of course, to improve the world; it turned out what I got was experience, awkward but invaluable. The liabilities faced were Romney's lack of knowledge about foreign policy and the nettlesome politics of the Vietnam War. The asset was Romney himself, a terrific governor, a believer in shirts-rolled-up, jump-into-the-trenches leadership, astoundingly handsome, lifted chin, confident eyes, exhaustingly energetic and enthusiastic, and owning an inspiring personal moral integrity, which was, as we would learn, sometimes too rigid. Early on, when we were flying back to Detroit from the Toronto EXPO, small-talking after homework, he observed that he had seen the movie "The Sound of Music" seven times. I groaned inwardly to myself: "Aw, oh! We're doomed." Some time later, the campaign came undone, largely due to this extraordinarily competent and honorable man being too rashly honest. Romney, showing judgment and courage, withdrew from the campaign, the only time he had ever quit anything in his life.

When I was in the State Department during the Vietnam War, the portfolio of countries I was responsible for, so to speak, contained Thailand, Laos, and Cambodia. The Under Secretary of State, number two and virtually running the Department, was my sponsor and friend, Elliot Richardson. A former Lt. Governor and Attorney General of Massachusetts, he was on his way to becoming one of the great American public servants of the second half of the 20th century. He would eventually head up four Cabinet Departments and hold two ambassadorships. He was brilliant, a master of complex policies, brave, always lifting up the civil servants, the experts, the

workers, the committed, in all the institutions he led. He had a clear and even appreciative view of the absurd, yet his commitment to doing what could possibly be done to advance fairness, security and honesty in his democratic republic and beyond was indomitable. He was a sweet friend, generous and rigorous. When I saw my own country subverting one of the nations in Southeast Asia I was working on, relentlessly bombing another, and finally invading the third, I thought that things weren't working out too well, for me or them. I wanted out. Richardson, who had gone on to become Secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and sympathizing with my predicament, said, "Come on over." I said, "I know nothing about what goes on there." He said, "Nonsense, you've had some education, you've been sick, and you know people on social security." I went, and we stuck together on an untended journey from HEW to the Defense and Justice Departments, until he resigned as Attorney General rather than carry out President Richard Nixon's order to fire special prosecutor Archibald Cox during "Watergate," in what came to be called "The Saturday Night Massacre" on October 22, 1973.

Once, in 1988, when I was working with refugees worldwide, I visited Tel Aviv to meet with Itzak Rabin, who was the Israeli Army Chief of Staff. I had known him slightly in Washington, when he was Israel's ambassador to the U.S. I won't say I was afraid of him, but he certainly made me very nervous. He was clearly tough as steel, there didn't seem to be a wisp of uncertainty about him, he was preternaturally calm, his eyes were ice blue, and he didn't want to meet with me. And I didn't blame him. I was representing the plight of the Palestinian refugees living in the West Bank of Gaza, the "occupied territories," although Israel rejected that categorization. The Israeli Army was responsible for guaranteeing security in the territories. Rabin was the chief occupier. I gave him my pitch. He listened respectfully and stonily. He barely said a word, I'm not sure he blinked once during our session. The situation, politically and

on the ground, impacted not unlike it is today, was very tense. He certainly made no promises. He met with me, and he let me out. But when I left I was absolutely certain he would do what he could, within admittedly strict parameters, to protect the humanitarian rights of the refugees. This proved to be true, long before Rabin became a great warrior-statesman, reminiscent of Michael Collins of Ireland. Serving as Prime Minister, he was assassinated by a religious zealot.

Joe Garba was a tribal chief, a major general and foreign minister of Nigeria. He was huge, very black, and a ferocious squash player. We first became friends when he came to the Institute of Politics when I was there. He was arrogant and humble, confident and insecure, impatient, a man of size in everything he did. He worked ruthlessly hard to get his masters degree at Harvard. He asked my wife Katie and me to be Godparents of his daughter Ramya. Later we fetched up at the United Nations together, he as the permanent representative of his country to the U.N., I as one of the U.S. Ambassadors there. After he had become President of the U.N. General Assembly in 1991, we exploited a chance to work together, trying to get the first anti-apartheid resolution directed at South Africa passed unanimously by the U.N. General Assembly. I had an easier assignment, herding the Western nations into consensus. Joe had to deliver the “front line states,” those African neighbors of South Africa who were angrily bound to force a version of the ban which no one else would accept. We would meet in the darkened corridor high in the U.N. Secretariat in the middle of the night to report and plot. I was exceeding the instructions of my government and I don’t think he was even listening to his. He assaulted, cajoled, debated, pummeled, and hugged his colleagues into submission. The resolution passed, unanimously.

Karin Landgren was my “handler,” my escort, my watchdog, on a mission to Croatia in 1994 for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. She was a mid-level international

civil servant, Swedish-American, smart, poised, unflappable and very professional. We didn't get along, mutually suspicious. She was talking to Mrs. Ogata, the High Commissioner in Geneva, every day, giving her updates on our progress, and the news was not good. We weren't making any. We were supposed to plan and negotiate an agreement for ethnic Serbs who had been displaced from their homes in Croatia during recent fighting. But we discovered this to be a very bad idea. The returns would without question ignite a resumption of conflict. We agreed in this, and we had become allies. She would face the wrath, or disappointment, of her boss, which wouldn't materially affect me. Close to the end of our mission we were in a vehicle driving from Zagreb to Belgrade through a zone supposedly under the security of Russian peacekeepers, when we were stopped at a make-shift roadblock. The only light was small fires by the side of the road, and flashlights carried by — it was hard to tell who these half-dozen fellows were. They had different uniforms, some were slovenly, a few drunk, maybe militia or road-block cowboys ready for fun and trouble. We didn't know. This was a Serbian-dominated region and the Russian troops ostensibly in charge had the reputation of being lazy, undisciplined and predatory. We shouldn't have been there. Our driver was Croatian, and he was shaking. Karin was cool and stern, sitting erect with disapproval, but not aggressive. She was the most vulnerable, maybe the driver next. She exuded strength. One soldier seemed to assume some charge, and in examining one of our passports with his flashlight, called out, quite loudly and clearly, "Jonathan Livingston..." And I said, "SEAGULL"! He looked at me, and repeated the entire name, apparently with some satisfaction. The other men looked confused, beginning to be disappointed; something was going on they didn't get. The man silently handed our passports back and waved us on. We went. Karin went on to be a high official in UNICEF, and the U.N. Secretary General's Special Representative in Nepal and Burundi, respectively.

Obviously, these people and stories are highlights out of a jumble of experience, but they are not rare, and with tenacity, opportunism, some adventurousness and luck, they are there for the finding and the taking.

Perhaps the most cherished thing to me about public service is that we always had the ideal to back us up. We always had the conviction of what we were trying to do undergirding us, making us happy and undaunted. We believed in what we were doing and this was founded of course on not just our advancement but explicitly in the service of others, and this invested in us energy and confidence. We didn't have the problem of worrying too much about money because there wasn't that much. If we did our best just on small tasks, out of the headlines, and didn't quit trying we would be serving the purpose. No matter how much we fell short, the stumbles, the unlikeable bosses, the non-promotions, especially when getting fired, the periods of tedium, the stifling bureaucracy, the underside of politics, there was always the buoying cause to depend upon and be inspired by.

Any true public service inherently involves caring for others and fighting for the common good and a larger sharing. Which is where we started. Thank you.