

# Global Engagement: The Right Path

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I would like to start by congratulating the Class of 2017 as well as the parents, family, and friends who supported you along the way. I would also like to congratulate Juniata College—a small college in rural America that embraces a truly global vision. With more than 200 students from thirty-nine countries and 40% of students studying abroad, your college's commitment to global engagement is impressive.<sup>1</sup> It prepares students well for the future. And it is an accomplishment that should make all of you proud.

Juniata, you are also something of a rebel since engaging the world is not exactly in vogue these days. And you are right to do so: Global engagement remains the right path, not only for Juniata students but for all of us. Today I'll explain why and also share my own personal story of building a life and a career and hopefully making a difference along the way. I'll show the ups and downs, the twists and turns—without airbrushing out the times I failed or got lucky. I hope that telling my story honestly will be helpful to you because real life is messy, real progress moves in fits and starts, and nobody's life is as perfect as it looks on Facebook. Please remember this when you inevitably hit one of those down points.

To be clear, I see global engagement as a mindset and a way of life that anyone can embrace, even if you never leave the country. And for those of you thinking that global engagement sounds a little too airy-fairy or like some liberal granola flavor of Ben and Jerry's ice cream, respectfully, I'd argue you're wrong. Global engagement is best viewed not as an alternative to being clear-eyed, or hardheaded, or just tough. In fact, it is the perfect companion.

There is a warning label on my speech today: Engaging the world will challenge your mind and uplift your soul, but it can also break your heart. For every act of ingenuity or humanity, there is cruelty and intolerance; after every breakthrough, setbacks. To echo Martin Luther King, Jr., and others before him, the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice. But, graduates, you will find it does not always bend as much or as quickly as we want it to.

Engaging with the world is still worth the effort. And I am asking you, Class of 2017, to be the generation that gets global engagement right.

Let me return to my own story. I am from a small town in western Massachusetts. My father was a hardware salesman who died without ever owning a passport. My mom was a teacher. We visited our

grandparents for vacations, and my world didn't stretch far. I babysat, went to ballet class, worked on a tobacco farm, and waited tables at the local Big Boy restaurant. Like most people, I faced various trials and tribulations. But I got lucky at least twice: first, in high school, I studied German, which happened to be the only language program with a study-abroad opportunity. Second, I ended up filling a last-minute hole in another school's trip to China. That is how I, as a girl from small-town New England, saw the Berlin Wall before the Iron Curtain fell and China before its astonishing rise from poverty. Years later I returned to Berlin and saw a guard tower used to spot and kill people trying to flee from East to West Berlin. Weeds grew out of it, and an abandoned car nearby had a windshield wiper bursting with parking tickets. I also returned to China, where I found that the seas of bicycles I remembered so vividly had nearly vanished. Instead, the roads were filled with cars, and everyone had a cell phone. These changes were utterly unimaginable only years before. And this insight—that dramatic, shocking change is possible even in a relatively short time—is worth remembering.

I went to American University in Washington, DC, at a time of intense turbulence in the world. The Cold War was ending, uncertainty was yielding to optimism, and it was breathtaking to see regular people pull together, rise up, and simply say, "Enough." And then one day, a favorite professor suggested I apply to a Ph.D. program, which surprised me as much as if he suggested I become an astronaut. I followed the advice, didn't really understand what I was getting myself into, and went right to graduate school—mostly because I wasn't ready to stop learning and didn't know what else to do. It helped that my then boyfriend, now husband, was going there too.

I remember orientation day, when I took a taxi to Georgetown University. My driver asked if I was a new student, and I said, yes, this was in fact my very first day as a Ph.D. student of political science. He turned to me beaming and exclaimed, "*I have a Ph.D. in political science!*" Now, certainly, the world needs good taxi drivers, and perhaps this was always his plan. But as a twenty-one-year-old who had just signed her student loan papers, this wasn't exactly what I wanted to hear.

I studied hard and enjoyed it, but as I started my dissertation, I started to wonder if I was on the wrong path. That may also happen to you one day, too. A full three years into my doctoral program, I realized I might not actually be wired for a life of scholarship. Then, the "opportunity" to test other paths came when my husband and I couldn't afford to pay our bills, and we both added a second job as office temps. Mine led to an unorthodox journey that ran from temp to associate dean at George Washington University. Not being able to pay bills had unexpectedly given me, as a very young person, the opportunity to rethink what skills students needed in the global economy and to help people from diverse backgrounds better understand the world. I saw firsthand the transformative effects of exposing people to new perspectives—whether they were soldiers or diplomats, business people or social workers. I learned that people everywhere can rise to challenges if given the education and the skills and the confidence to

do so. And I learned, as you will, that sometimes opportunity comes in the most unexpected of packages as long as you are open to them.

The terrorist attacks of 9/11 shattered America's optimism about the world. "Why do they hate us?" was the question of the day. And it reminded us how very blind we can be to what lies beyond our narrow worlds. I was living in London at the time and stood in long lines to pay my respects at the U.S. Embassy and mourn all that had been lost. An older man who worked in my building put a note of condolence under the door. His whole life, he had seen America as a pillar of strength and a beacon of freedom. My son wasn't even two yet, but I knew his world would look different.

I eventually went to work at the State Department, where I focused on improving relations with Muslim communities around the world. Since science and technology are keys to both economic growth and human advancement, we zeroed in on them as a bridge. And as I met with entrepreneurs, scientists, and educators from across the broader Middle East, I saw how much could be gained by all of us if we could give young people more opportunities and deny advantage to those who instead preached insularity and hate.

I landed a job as a scholar at the Brookings Institution, a job I soon lost when the funding collapsed. I then ended up at a defense and national security think tank because I sat next to its incoming president (and one of your board members) on an airplane at a time when I urgently needed a job. I was out of my element and sometimes felt wildly out of my depths. I did not speak military and had not served in combat. But I did what I could to make my colleagues successful. And I am so very proud of the work we did to advocate for a U.S. strategy change in Iraq and Afghanistan, more effective means to support America's veterans and prevent military suicides, better cyber security, and new approaches to undercut terrorists around the world. I learned that the best route to impact is making the effort to genuinely understand issues from multiple viewpoints and being willing to question even friends and allies when necessary. That, by the way, is also a surefire way to make people mad at you once in a while. And I decided that if no one is ever uncomfortable, either you aren't really working for change or you're not doing work that matters.

I turned to the work of peace building, which is not only moral, but it's also in our self-interest. Conflicts that fester cost lives and treasure. They deny human potential, destroy futures, and provide a breeding ground for criminals and terrorists and even disease. The good news is that even in the most dire of circumstances, I can attest to you that there are people working, in big ways and small, every single day, to make the world a better place. There are villagers in the Democratic Republic of the Congo who are putting aside past tensions and forging ties across ethnic groups. There are journalists in Afghanistan who risk their lives to make sure citizens are informed. There are women in Nepal who are learning to

start businesses and provide for their families. There are Tunisians who are laboring to build a new democracy. I have met them. And I can tell you that we will all benefit if they are successful.

Building peace is brutally hard work. And it can be painful to see gains erode in places like Iraq, where my friends in the U.S. military fought, and colleagues—both Iraqi and American peace builders—put their lives on the line for it. It can be emotionally exhausting to see innocents suffer, progress erode, and people jailed or killed just for standing up for what’s right. It fails often, and I watched our partners make gains in places like Yemen and Libya, Syria and South Sudan, only to see those countries erupt again into violence. I recall the day a friend sent me an email reading only, “I don’t see a lot of peace in the world. Why are you screwing up so badly?”

I ask you, though, what is the alternative? If we turn our backs and close our doors, will we really be better off in the end? I think the answer is no. Change does happen, all too slowly, then sometimes all at once. The pressure builds until something bursts forth. We are terrible at predicting when it will happen, but when it does, it is powerful.

I’m now privileged to run an organization called IREX, which was established during the Cold War to increase mutual understanding through the exchange of people and ideas. When the Cold War ended, IREX contributed to Eurasia’s emerging democracies by cultivating the next generation of leaders, supporting education and independent media, and extending access to the Internet. We now do this work globally, in more than 100 countries.<sup>2</sup>

I believe IREX’s mission of investing in people to promote more just, prosperous, and inclusive societies is precisely what our world—and our country—needs right now. We need leaders at every level of society who are dedicated to serving others. We need youth who are engaged and empowered. We need civic and governing institutions that are effective and accountable. We need the broadest possible access to quality education and information. But you, Class of 2017, will need to work for the change you want to see.

When I was in your shoes, graduating from college in 1991, greater globalization seemed full of hope. (Ask your parents at lunch today. The end of the Cold War was a very big deal.) It promised freedom and prosperity for those who had been oppressed and poor, and a world of opportunity. Now, we may have been a bit too irrationally exuberant at the time. We underestimated some of the challenges that would emerge. But change—substantial, history-altering change—does happen.

In the course of my lifetime:

- Extreme poverty around the world has dropped by more than 70%.<sup>3</sup>
- The percentage of people living in democracies jumped by a quarter.<sup>4</sup>
- And half of the world’s seven billion people now have access to the Internet.<sup>5</sup>

And America's engagement with the world has paid dividends. Despite all the challenges today:

- Of America's top fifteen trade partners, eleven are former recipients of foreign aid.<sup>6</sup>
- We have avoided major wars between great powers since World War II.
- And more than 40% of Fortune 500 companies were founded by immigrants or their children.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to benefitting our country and communities, global engagement will enrich your lives as individuals. You will connect with people who will move you. You will learn and have your perspectives challenged. Sometimes this will increase your conviction. Other times you'll decide others have found a better way. You will be awed at human resilience and ingenuity. You will cultivate gratitude for your own life and your own country, which—for all its faults—offers much that we take for granted. And, hopefully, this gratitude will move you to protect what is precious and to fight for it.

So as hard as it is to remember sometimes, the arc of history is longer than it appears in the moment. And we will be more secure and better off still if we remember that America chose a path of global engagement after witnessing the devastation caused by fascism, prejudice, intolerance, isolationism, economic mercantilism, and two world wars.

All this said, the past year has revealed sharp differences in how Americans are experiencing the world. Some have careers that are engaging and lucrative. They travel. They find it enriching to live in diverse communities. But too many have been left behind by technological and economic advances. They see changes in their communities for which they are unprepared. They are dying, at earlier ages than in the past. They feel America is falling behind. They feel unsafe and unmoored.

And they deserve better.

Now, I believe fervently that American security comes not from walls and fear but from vitality and strength. It comes from an economy that is adaptive, a society in which mobility is possible and innovation is rewarded, and a shared set of values that unite us. And I believe that if we truly want both security and justice, we must make life better not just for ourselves but for people of all backgrounds, in our country and around the world. A nation like ours cannot hide under a blanket, nor should we. Indeed, our greatest accomplishments have come from being open rather than closed, bold rather than fearful. That is what I wish for our country going forward—and for you as individuals. But you, Class of 2017, are going to need to do better than my generation at extending the gains across our society, pulling others up and communities together.

For me, engaging globally is a personal journey. And I know it is one that many of you here at Juniata share. This journey can be filled with setbacks, but, I promise you, it is richly rewarding.

In good commencement address tradition, I'd like to end with a quote.

I recently attended a memorial service for my friend Richard Solomon, one our country's great diplomats. Richard was the consummate diplomat—polished and polite, distinguished and disciplined. So

I was surprised to learn that his favorite quote was from the hard-living gonzo journalist Hunter Thompson, a man most decidedly un-Richard-like.

Here is the quote:

“Life should not be a journey to the grave with the intention of arriving safely in a pretty and well-preserved body, but rather to skid in broadside in a cloud of smoke, thoroughly used up, totally worn out, and loudly proclaiming, ‘Wow! What a Ride!’”<sup>8</sup>

Class of 2017, I urge you:

- Get out of your bubble.
- Be open to opportunity, even if it is disguised as crisis.
- Find meaning.
- Connect with others and help them succeed.
- Stand up for what you believe in.
- Be brave.
- Engage the world.
- Remember that change *is* possible and *you* can make a difference.
- Be happy.

And, along the way, have the ride of your lives.

## NOTES

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