

Soka University of America
Fourth Undergraduate Commencement Address, titled
“From Civilizational Conflict to Civilizational Harmony”

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Graduates, Mr. President, distinguished members of the Board of Trustees, faculty and staff, proud parents of graduates, and friends and guests, good afternoon. I am deeply honored to be with you on this momentous occasion.

I began by addressing graduates, because it is their special day. You who are graduating today have indeed reached a milestone on your lifelong journey. You represent 13 different countries around the world.

As I congratulate you and your parents and salute you on your accomplishment today, I want to remind you that as this day dawned, it presented you with tremendous opportunities but equally grave challenges.

I realize that I have already violated one of the two cardinal principles for commencement speakers: “Make it funny.” But I promise to abide by the other: “Keep it short.”

There is no denying that in the aftermath of 9/11 the prevailing mood in this country was that of uncertainty, fear, and resentment. The extremist terrorists had thrown down the gauntlet. This, unfortunately, in some instances led to intolerance and unkind acts toward those who looked different, speak with an accent, and wear different clothes; in sum, those who are strangers, not “us,” but “them.”

Then came the US invasion of Iraq, al-Qaeda’s dastardly acts of terror violence, Abu Ghraib, and Guantanamo, along with the ongoing Middle East conflict and the struggle with Iran. Many countries took harsh, draconian measures to combat terrorism.

Some observers pronounced that Professor Samuel Huntington’s theory, the “Clash of Civilizations -- Intercivilizational Conflict,” was underway. He had asserted in his 1993 article in *Foreign Affairs* and subsequently in his 1996 book, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, that in the post-Cold War period the fundamental source of conflict will not be ideological or economic, but cultural, religious, and civilizational. “The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future,” he wrote.

Critics have faulted Huntington and his thesis for over-generalizations and ambiguities in his definition and even in the number and categories of civilizations and how coherent and united they are internally. Critics have especially taken him to task for his focus on the “particular prevalence” of civilizational conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims.

I don't quarrel with these critiques, but I recommend to you instead a critique of the clash of civilizations on philosophical grounds. Philosophers tell us that notwithstanding the current alienation and political tension between the East and West on civilizational and religious bases, we should instead reflect on the nature of human consciousness, which requires dialogue to realize itself fully. Similarly, a civilization, reflecting collective consciousness, realizes itself through civilizational dialogue, encounter with cultural traditions and expressions and value systems distinct from it. This interdependence enriches civilizations, eventually leading to a universal culture of peace, stability and harmony, both nationally and internationally. As my own faith teaches, each nation being proud of its own identity, but part of universal consciousness unified in diversity, is the desired and preferred future of humankind. This is the philosophical basis for rejection of the clash of civilizations, not allowing this thinking to become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The latest initiative at the UN is the Alliance for Civilizations, initially proposed by the President of Spain in 2005 and co-sponsored by the Turkish Prime Minister. The then-Secretary General of the UN, Kofi Annan, assembled a high level group consisting of 20 eminent persons representing a full range of religions and civilizations which produced a report. The report's recommendations are to touch on four thematic areas: education, youth, migration, and media, and to combat "exclusivism" and extremism. It defines exclusivism as "those who feed on exclusion and claim sole ownership of the truth." An action plan for countries is proposed to be submitted to the UN General Assembly by the end of 2009.

It is in this context that I wish to remind you that almost ten years ago, on November 4, 1998, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the year 2001 as the UN Year of Dialogue, emphasizing "the importance of tolerance in international relations and the significant role of dialogue as a means to reach understanding, remove threats to peace, and strengthen interaction and exchange among civilizations." The Founder of Soka University, President Daisaku Ikeda, exemplifies the power of dialogue as he has not only entered into hundreds of important dialogues with eminent people, but has declared that dialogue is the cornerstone of his work for world peace.

His Excellency Stjepan Mesic, then president of the Republic of Croatia, spoke of three elements as being crucial for a true dialogue among nations: tolerance, ecumenism, and human rights. I should add that it is not simply tolerance which lies at the root of civilizational dialogue, but celebration of differences, respect for differences, that paves the way, providing a stable and enduring foundation for peace and harmony.

The two major natural disasters in the last month, the monstrous cyclone in Myanmar and the deadly earthquake in China, have caused so much suffering -- more than 100,000 dead, millions injured, orphaned, and uprooted, and a dismal future looms for them all. We all mourned with parents like Mr. Liu and Mrs. Tang, migrant laborers building luxury homes in Beijing so that they could send their 15-year-old daughter to school in their village in the interior of China. They left Beijing three days after the quake on a grueling three-day trip by train, boat, and on foot, to find as they reached the village that their daughter had perished along with 200 other children as the school building collapsed.

Politics aside, we witnessed a groundswell of compassion, with humanitarian aid pouring in and rescue workers arriving from all over the world. People of all religions, cultures and creeds were passionately engaged. The so-called clash of civilizations must have been the last thing on their minds. What instead was on their minds was the innate, inherent desire to save lives, to comfort those grieving and in distress, and to provide assistance to the needy.

This desire to help is what makes us human. And it is not confined to just providing help in major disasters. Your education at Soka University of America has taught you special values which nurture that desire to help. Congratulations on the decision to make Soka the foundation for your future good deeds. The education and mentoring you have received here have given you the tools to successfully face the challenges presented to you.

My concluding thoughts for the graduates today are these:

Your future is exceptionally bright. In this era of globalization the individual is more powerful than ever. Glorious opportunities await you -- make the conscious choice.

You are a global citizen: serve your country and the world, and serve humanity.

Celebrate differences.

Do not tolerate extremism.

Work to end discrimination, inequity, injustice, and poverty.

Remember that the entire human race is one family.

Treasure and protect Mother Earth.

Lend a helping hand wherever and whenever you can.

Admire heroes, emulate heroes - such as Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu, and Daisaku Ikeda --, and be one

Don't ever, ever lose idealism, compassion, enthusiasm, and hope.

Today is a most joyous occasion. Go celebrate it.

God speed.