

## 2019 UWC-USA Graduation Remarks

Families and friends of our 2020 UWC-USA graduates, 2020 Giulio Regeni Alumni Award winner, Rene Celaya '88, and all who have contributed to make the education of the Class of 2020 possible, welcome and thank you for joining us in this virtual celebration!

Class of 2020, welcome to this virtual celebration of your accomplishment! In a spirit of gratitude, please join me in a smile of appreciation for all of the people who have helped to change your lives by supporting your journey to, and through, UWC-USA.

What does one say to a graduating class in the middle of a global pandemic? I have been asking myself this question since our leadership team decided that even though the Class of 2020 put on their own graduation, in record time and beautifully executed, we wanted to acknowledge their accomplishment on the originally planned graduation day.

A graduation speech is typically about two things: past accomplishment, and future possibility. But the thing about a pandemic is that time seems to take on a new meaning. We seem to be stuck in a present of pervasive uncertainty. Uncertainty about whether we can go back. Uncertainty about how we go forward.

Recently I've been struck by the feeling of *deja vu*, even though this situation is unprecedented in my lifetime. I have felt this way before, but I couldn't recall when. And then it hit me. When my children were little, I loved reading to them. When they were 3 or 4, I began reading many of the world's fairy tales to them, thinking they were more age appropriate than Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, all of whom I read out loud to them before deciding to switch to more age appropriate material. When I first started reading fairy tales to them, I noticed my children would actually shiver as I read. It hadn't occurred to me before then how incredibly strange it is to read fairy tales to children:

- First, fairy tales are really scary. Many of them are meant to fill us with fear. They lead us into a world where innocents are cast into the unknown, in danger of their lives and unsure how they'll come out of situations beyond their control.
- Second, fairy tales often reinforce a natural human tendency: to think in terms of "us and them". The good and the wicked. The beautiful and the ugly. The village people and the stranger.
- And third, fairy tales promise happy endings--but usually it requires someone winning and someone losing.

The coronavirus pandemic has felt like a fairy tale to me. All of the elements are there. Innocents are falling sick and none of the wise women and men of the world can figure out why. Fear grips the land, spreading perhaps even more virally than the invisible enemy. As fear fills the hearts of the people, they begin to distrust one another. Countries begin to point fingers at allies and enemies alike, looking for someone to blame. Neighbors begin to divide into those who wear masks and those who won't. Economic divides deepen between those who can afford to work at home and those who can't. It's us and them, and we all think we are

on the side of right. So what's the happy ending in the time of Covid-19? Does someone need to lose so that someone else gets to win? Or might there be another way?

I propose a new kind of fairy tale. It starts out the same, with innocents in danger and fear gripping the land. But what if there were a group of people who said "No!" to "us and them thinking" as a response? What if they shared one experience they could always go back to, an experience interrupted by an invisible force that made them say goodbye too soon, but that was so strong that they could never forget it? An experience that transcended "us and them," or at least that held out such a possibility? What if these people found that happy endings don't require winners and losers, but friends working together across divides in acknowledgment of their common humanity, their common vulnerability, and their common purpose for a better and more just future for ALL?

I propose that your UWC-USA experience--**our** UWC experience--holds the key to breaking the spell of uncertainty that Covid-19 has cast over the globe. In some deep sense, you can't go back to it. And even when 100% of you show up for your first reunion, it won't be the same. But you can go forward, and you can take this transformative experience with you. You can remember that at UWC-USA, when you were afraid, someone stepped up to show you how to be brave. You can remember that when you finally exhausted all of the reasons to preserve the distinctions between *us and them*, it turned out it's just us, and we're in it together. You can remember that the happiest ending of all is the one when we are standing together, facing an uncertain future with courage rather than fear, trusting one another and combining our efforts toward a better world for all.

We have the power to reinvent the fairy tale. Maybe all Covid-19 has done is give us a push to accelerate our work. Will there still be uncertainty when the joy of graduation fades? Yes. But rather than being stuck in the presence of uncertainty, torn between going back and going forward, maybe this pandemic will push us to sprout wings and fly as Guillaume Apollinaire suggests in his fairy tale masquerading as a poem:

"Come to the edge," he said.

"We can't, we're afraid!" they responded.

"Come to the edge," he said.

"We can't, We will fall!" they responded.

"Come to the edge," he said.

And so they came.

And he pushed them.

And they flew."

Class of 2020, on behalf of the entire UWC-USA global community, I wish you grateful and glorious flight!