

Geneva Graduate Institute, Graduation Ceremony, September 2021

Marie-Laure Salles

Dear colleagues, dear students and soon to be graduates, dear friends and family members, ladies and gentlemen good morning to all and a warm welcome at the Geneva Graduate Institute, in our beautiful Maison de la Paix.

Let me say how delighted I am, to be able to have this graduation ceremony today, all of us physically present. We do realize that current constraints have prevented some family members from joining us today – our Covid world is definitely entrenching and even creating so many new barriers and frontiers... All of us are doing our best under constantly changing sets of constraints – but the situation is never fully satisfactory. I am deeply convinced though that even if your close ones, dear students, are not physically with us today they are intensely thinking of you – as much as you are sharing this moment with them.

Let me at this stage take a few minutes to say proper thank yous to the teams at the institute that have made this day possible. I can tell you that organizing such an event in full respect of sanitary rules, all the more as those rules have been changing almost every week over the past two months has represented a lot of work and energy, a lot of stress, in the face of constant uncertainties.... Hence, I would like to sincerely thank the entire team at the direction of studies as well as all members of our different administrative departments that have been involved and very busy over the last months making sure that everything would be ready for this graduation day to take place in the best possible conditions. Please join me in thanking all of them!

We often think of life as linear but it is also a succession of cycles, with endings that lead to new beginnings. Graduation is such a marker, the closest we get in modern societies to a rite of passage. Today is both an end and a beginning – your graduation day and at the same time your commencement as the English word nicely reminds us... the symbolic passage into a new life,

into a new start. It is an exciting moment – you are entering open seas with many possible futures and dreams ahead, futures that are yours to be invented, dreams that are yours to be explored. And as you are about to embark on new adventures, you may want to ponder the beautiful words of the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran:

Your living is determined not so much by what life brings to you as by the attitude you bring to life; not so much by what happens to you as by the way your mind looks at what happens.

Today is a day for emotions. Graduation ceremonies always are. For many emotions, of different kinds.

- A day for pride naturally - and a celebration of your success and achievements.
- But it is also a day for gratitude - because even if our success and achievements belong to us we always owe them in part to others and to the support, the trust, the benevolence, the resources, the friendship or the love those others have given us and shared with us.
- This is also a day for togetherness and bonding - you have created a community during your years at the Institute and this community will always be there in the future even though naturally in a different form. In a few minutes you will move, through the magic of performativity, from students to alumni of the institute - let me tell you this House will always remain yours and we will always be extremely happy to hear from you, to see you and welcome you again here in many different ways and forms.

So graduations are special moments... But graduation this year is even more special! It comes at the end of two very peculiar academic years.... Two strange years that inscribe themselves in a world that appears to have lost its compass... And you deserve particularly warm congratulations today. You have probably heard the following a number of times by now but it is undeniable that those last two years have forged your resilience and have given you a strength that previous generations of students did not have to muster and develop. Those were difficult years, we now realize, because they fragilized what is at the heart of our humanity - our social and physical bonds. One of the reasons why you are stronger than previous generations is that you have realized the importance of those bonds and the necessity to nurture them.

Over the last few months we have all come to measure the value of what we were deprived of for a too long while. We have understood in particular that Universities are much more than platforms producing and spreading knowledge - Universities are essential places for the

expression of our humanity and for the experience of the kinds of social and physical connectedness that we all deeply need. Because we have been for too long deprived of this, we have understood that meaningful debates and reflexive and critical thinking do not work so well online. Naturally we have all been grateful that the technology allowed us to keep going, to keep exchanging, learning and working. But the richness of education, its strength and essential value comes from experimenting through direct interactions a diversity of values, ideas, emotions, readings of situations and perspectives that are different from ours. The value of education is in working together, elbow to elbow, towards forms of respectful reconciliation that lead us to understand our world and ourselves better, in a deeper way. A purely online version of this will never be able to replicate this kind of learning, experimenting, maturing and nurturing environment. More generally a society where we would all be monads connected to the world and to each other only through our digital lifeline is getting close to the worst possible dystopia if you believe that the salt of humanity lies in bonds of connectedness, sharing, feelings and emotions, empathy, joint action and engagement.

Humanity has survived only thanks to interdependence and collaboration - at the end of his life the American psychologist Erik Erikson, professor at Harvard, expressed this in a very clear and definite form : *Life does not make sense without interdependence*, he told us. *We need each other and the earlier we know that the better.*

As you are leaving us today and commencing, launching into the next cycle of your life, I wish the world around us would be a bit more rozy! It is not, far from it, and it has not been for a while. The Covid crisis has only made clearer and more acute the fact that our world has lost its compass, that we have collectively gone off course - in our relationship to nature and in our relationships to each other. Peace is fragile. Our use of natural common goods is profoundly unfair and unsustainable. Our democracies are battered with risks on many of our freedoms. Inequalities are a cancer with a direct impact on our economies and dangerous metastases in our societies and politics. As Hannah Arendt expressed it in her 1953 book ideology and terror:

What precipitates men so easily towards totalitarian movements and prepares them so well for such domination is the growing desolation everywhere...

And in an echo to what we have been living through over the last six months and to what I said before about the importance of interdependence, she adds at the end of the book:

What prepares men for totalitarian domination in the non-totalitarian world is the fact that loneliness, once a borderline experience usually suffered in certain marginal conditions like old age, has become an everyday experience of the ever-growing masses of our century. The chief characteristic of the mass man is not brutality and backwardness

but his isolation and lack of normal social relationships.

More than ever the kinds of critical thinking skills and transdisciplinary perspective on social and human issues that the institute has provided you with will be very useful to navigate this uncertain and worrying world. You are already well equipped but the task ahead is serious as the future strongly depends on you, on your generation and on your willingness to take on the daunting task of reinventing the future. In the words of the early twentieth century French philosopher, Simone Weil:

The future does nothing for us, gives us nothing. It is we who build it and to build it, we must give all to it, even our life.

We need to work for a better future, it is our common responsibility and for your generation and the next it is a question of survival. Without sustainability and equity, without effective multilateral collaboration, without humanity, there will be no peace – that is for sure!

Before I leave the floor to our Director of Studies, Andrea Bianchi, I would like to suggest a compass in six words for the next stage of your life :

1. Find your purpose
2. Keep your passion
3. Embrace our planet, that's the only one we have
4. Exercise responsibility
5. Create bonds - the kinds that come with empathy, tolerance, benevolence and love
6. And as Leo Tolstoy once said, if you want to be happy, be!

Andrea the floor is yours.