

Geneva Graduate Institute, Graduation Ceremony, September 2022

Marie-Laure Salles

Dear students and soon to be graduates, dear friends and family members, dear colleagues, ladies and gentlemen good afternoon to all of you and a warm welcome at the Geneva Graduate Institute, in our Maison de la Paix. Today as ever and even more than ever we want to affirm the name of our house as a political act - la Maison de la Paix, the House of Peace... because on the other side of war there will be peace, there has to be peace.

*Why is this age worse than earlier ages?*

*In a stupor of grief and dread*

*have we not fingered the foulest wounds*

*and left them unhealed by our hands?*

*In the west the falling light still glows,*

*and the clustered housetops glitter in the sun,*

*but here death is already chalking the doors with crosses,*

*and calling the ravens, and the ravens are flying in.*

This poem dates from 1919, or does it really? It could have been written yesterday. The author is the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, and it is titled - *Why is this Age Worse than Earlier Ages?*

The question that bounces back from this title, from this poem, is.... How come we are still having to ask that question, in regular cycles? How come that today well into the 21<sup>st</sup> century the idea that this age is getting worse, on a number of striking dimensions, still imposes itself on us? The return of war with unparalleled powers of massive destruction, environmental threats, the reinvention of authoritarian regimes with the striking power of “digital inside”, the return of global pandemics, increasing economic and social inequalities, and sadly I could go on....

This is unfortunately the world in front of us, and in front of you dear graduates as you will be leaving our Maison de la Paix.... And I only wish I would not have to start my speech today in this way.

Graduation ceremonies symbolically mark the end of an important life period and the transition

to new beginnings – a commencement as the English word nicely reminds us. So welcome to your commencement. You are standing on the doorway to the next stage of your life. To all of you I wish that next stage to be as fulfilling and rewarding as possible, with many professional achievements but also personal joys.

As you are turning this page of your life, you are leaving behind familiar ground to enter uncharted territories – moving from the lake to open seas as it were... this is certainly exciting and exhilarating – the future is yours to invent and to explore. But there can also be some worries and fears – after all the open seas you are entering look dark and dangerous.

Because the world around us is as it is, and as you are about to embark on new adventures, the following words by the Lebanese poet Khalil Gibran are more meaningful than ever:

*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.*

What defines our current zeitgeist? A number of structuring trends I would propose, are likely to impose their mark for a while and to have profound consequences:

1. First we have entered an age of radical uncertainty... not so long ago we used to believe that we could know (and therefore master) the unknown. Today, in spite of the extreme sophistication of our tools, we are having to recognize, day after day, that we should prepare to face the unknown unknown.... And this for sometime to come.
2. Second we live in an age of paradoxes – we have produced immense riches and yet they have never been as unequally shared; we have developed so much knowledge and still we have never had so much dis- and misinformation; never have we been so connected and never have we been at the same time so lonely –our world is increasingly defined by structural loneliness;
3. Third, we have stepped into an age of existential angst. It is not just a new age of fear – as there have been many in human history... we are having to face a striking form of existential fear that we humans have created for ourselves, whether through the development of arms that can annihilate our species or through the devastating consequences of the Anthropocene on our natural environment and therefore on ourselves as a species or even through the extreme versions of the transhumanist project that are essentially about overcoming humanity...

So those are dangerous times indeed. There are systemic dynamics that connect environmental and climate disruption with economic inequalities, social dislocations, wars, threats to democracy

and the return of authoritarianism. The other side of the coin though is that *“in exceptional periods, everything becomes possible”* to quote here the father of Europe, Jean Monnet. But this realist optimism calls for our collective engagement. We need to work for a better future, it will not just happen and it is our common responsibility. For your generation and the next it is more than a responsibility, it is a question of survival. 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.*

With that in mind, the critical thinking skills and deep transdisciplinary reading of social and human issues that the institute has provided you with will come in handy. *Critical thinking* is a first necessary step that makes it possible to move towards the type of *creative engagement* that contemporary challenges are urgently calling for. We are all in this together – and the issues we are facing are too extreme and too urgent for us to be “bowling alone” if you allow me to borrow Robert Putnam’s words. In the long run humanity has only survived through *collaboration* – and collaboration is becoming key again in this new age of fear and extremes. Our times also call for all the *courage* we can muster. The courage to fight for peace because war is always a defeat for humanity, the courage to fight for sustainability and equity, the courage to reinvent effective multilateral collaboration, because without those peace is impossible and humanity will exhaust if not destroy itself!

Before I close, I would like to express again my huge thank yous to the professors and the teams at the institute that have been there throughout your course of study and have furthermore organized and made this day possible. Thank you to the entire team at the direction of studies as well as to all members of our different administrative departments! Please join me in thanking all of them!

