

Living to Improve the World

Fernando Reimers

Commencement Speech Bahcesehir University

Istambul, June 24, 2012

Dear graduates of Bahcesehir University: Congratulations!

It is a distinct honor to have the opportunity to say a few words at your Graduation, and I want to thank Mr. Enver Yucel and the President of the University [Name] for the invitation to be with you on this important occasion.

You are very fortunate to be joining the ranks of University graduates today. You have good reason to be happy and proud, and I'm sure there are many others who are equally proud of your accomplishments, your parents, your families, your professors, and the academic and administrative leadership and other staff at Bahcesehir, and all those whose efforts and support have helped you reach this very important milestone in your life. On a Global level you are very privileged, because less than 7% of the world's population has the opportunity that you have today to graduate from college. While the

opportunity to enroll in university has expanded significantly in Turkey in the last fifteen years, today only one in three persons in the country has the opportunity to attend college. The privilege that having been among the few who could reach the highest levels of education has given you will bring with it other privileges, you will have more opportunities and more choices about what work you do than those who have not had those opportunities, you will be able to make more informed decisions about most issues that affect your lives, you will live longer and healthier lives, and you will be able to pass on some of those advantages to your children. In sum, as part of the small group of people who have had the greatest opportunities to cultivate your talent and develop skills, you will have more freedoms in life than the majority of the people who have not had your opportunities, and more freedoms in life than any generation preceding you. More than most people you will be able to do anything you want with your life. That is an extraordinary possibility that gives you extraordinary power, the power to be the author of your destiny. I would like to invite you to think carefully about how you plan to use the power that comes from that freedom. I would also like to remind you of three simple facts, which may help you in deciding how to use the freedoms that your higher education will provide you: first, so much of what you have achieved to date is the result of factors over

which you had little control, you are well educated and smart to a great extent because you have been lucky, but fundamentally you are no different to any other human being, most of whom have just had less luck than you did. Second, while you can expect to live longer than most humans have lived in the past, you will not live forever and, in the grand view of human history, your life will be short. Third, there are big and important challenges, in Turkey and elsewhere, that provide you the opportunity to make a big difference in the lives of others. The logical consequence of these three facts is that you should take yourselves seriously and commit to living to advance purposes bigger than yourselves. Let me explain each of these three facts and what I think are their implications for living a life of purpose.

### **1. You have been lucky.**

I know that you have not reached this point in your life without effort. You have spent much of your time studying, learning new things, probably long hours and sleepless nights preparing for exams, working on research projects. You are probably aware of how that personal effort has helped you gain new skills, new levels of understanding, how it has improved you over time. Given your efforts you might conclude that you have earned your privilege as a highly educated person and all the benefits that will come from it, that from now on you deserve the good fortune that a higher education

will bring. I do not disagree with this view. I admire your effort and urge you to continue working hard as you go on into your profession for hard work will be necessary for you to achieve your goals, and your country and many others will be better off if you work hard. But I want to suggest also that, to a great extent, you are the beneficiaries not just of your hard work, but of the hard work of others who provided opportunities for you. I am certain that behind each of your stories of academic achievement are the efforts and the support of family members, teachers and many others in your lives, who made it possible for you to be graduating today. Less visible to you perhaps, your opportunity to be graduating from university today is due to the vision and the efforts of those who founded this University, and whose hard work to continuously improve it, provided you the opportunities to be educated. Imagine for a moment that you had been born just ten years earlier than you were. Half of you would in all likelihood not be graduating today, because the percentage of people who could access higher education in Turkey has doubled during that period. Many of you, I am sure, have reached higher levels of education than your parents and relatives, a sign of the expansion in educational opportunity which has taken place in the country in recent years. My point is simple, you should not take your privilege for granted, or simply assume that you deserve it, that you have

earned it. You stand on the shoulders of giants who created the opportunities that have allowed you to have greater freedoms than they did. Most human progress, and there has been extraordinary progress in human history in expanding education, has been possible because there were people, people like you and me, who made it their business to create the conditions that allowed others to cultivate their talent and to develop skills. I will come back to this point later.

## **2. Life is short.**

Many of you are young, and you may feel now that you will live forever. Indeed you will probably live longer than most people who have not had as much education as you have, because your skills will allow you to take care of your health and to live a lifestyle that will lead to a longer life than would be the case if you had less education. You are also likely to live longer than your parents and that your grandparents, and much longer than any previous generation in human history. On average, Turkish citizens today can expect to live 74 years, that's a full 10 more years of life than if you had been born 20 years ago. And you know that most of you will live longer than the average. But, in the grand scheme of things your life will still be short, and it will go by very quickly. Those of you who have had close relatives die have gained the perspective of what it means to look back at a life from that

vantage point. It is a very powerful experience. Every year, when I welcome my students at Harvard, I urge them to take a walk and spend some time in a local cemetery, reflecting on the fact that they too will one day reach that point. Understanding that life is short can help you sharpen the focus and understand the importance of making good choices about how to spend your own life.

### **3. There are big challenges.**

There are many big and important challenges, in your communities, in Turkey, and in the world, that can use your talent, your imagination, and where you can make a most significant difference. Think about the challenge of creating conditions that allow all people the opportunity to live with dignity, to promote social inclusion. This requires creating work for them, educating people, addressing numerous factors that create the social inequalities that challenge social cohesion and stability. Think about the challenge of helping to improve health, of addressing epidemics. Think about the challenges of preserving the environment, of being good stewards of this small home we call earth. Think about the challenges of continuing to advance our understanding of the world and of ourselves, of advancing science and knowledge, and of creating the technologies which translate that knowledge into tools to expand human well being. Or think about the most

immediate challenge of helping to improve the lives of the people around you, of those you care about, of helping them live with quality and be happy. Think about the challenge of establishing a family, of raising children, and of making it possible for them to have even more opportunities than you did.

As you think about these challenges I urge you to think globally, to expand your areas of concern in ways that concern your interest in your local community with communities far away, to see yourselves as global citizens, to reflect on how we are bound to our fellow human beings and how we can only become fully humans if we engage with others and help them achieve their humanity. The world is today more integrated and interdependent than it has ever been. We are tied to our fellow humans around the world by trade, by travel, by migration, by media and information, by technology, by climate, by the conditions that affect health. What happens with environmental degradation in any corner of the world today, affects us all. An outbreak of an epidemic in another corner of the world affects us all. Political instability in another part of the world affects us all. Similarly what happens to us here and the choices that we make affect others around the world. You have the power to influence many others around the world, to

make choices that will pay forward to others near and afar the many gifts you have received which have allowed you to be graduating today.

My invitation to you is to think about these and other challenges as you decide how to spend the freedom and the power that your education provides you. To think big and to expand the circle of the people you care about in deciding what challenges to take on, because I am certain that it is in finding purposes bigger than yourself in life that you will find the greatest satisfaction and happiness.

Having reminded you that you have been lucky, that life will be short and that there are important purposes that await your leadership let me now remind you that you can make a difference, a tangible, important and big difference and that, increasingly, new technologies, access to capital and forms of organization, allow people like yourselves, to make very meaningful contributions to very challenging issues. I will first share three short stories about how ordinary people made a contribution to expanding the educational opportunities of others. I will then expand on one of these stories to illustrate how leadership builds on the good work of those who came before us. I will say a few words about how new technologies allow us



unprecedented opportunities to make a difference, and a few words about my own journey.

About two years ago I was in Morocco to observe the final competition of Injaz Al-Arab, this is an education program in which students are taught to create a business to address an issue of interest to them. Students participate in a series of competitions in their district, and country. The winners participate in a competition among all seven countries in the Middle East where Injaz operates. In small stands the teams of high school students who had created the companies explained to the audience their mission, business strategy, and how they had gone about creating the enterprise. I remember the excitement of the students, and of the public, that evening. One project in particular, created by a group of young women from Oman, struck me as brilliant. They had created a company to publish story books for young children in Arabic in order to support the development of early literacy. I asked these young women why they had chosen to create a company focused on early literacy, and they explained that as they thought hard about why some people had more opportunities in life than others they realized that education was very important. They also concluded that one of the reasons some people did not do well in school was because they never learned to

read well. In researching what conditions facilitating learning to read competently, with understanding and loving to lead, they discovered that early literacy was very critical. They observed that there were not many books in Arabic that parents could read to their children in Oman, so they decided to correct this by creating this company. Think about this example, clearly these women, all high school students, made a tangible difference for the children who will be able to benefit from the books they published, but think also about what these young women gained from engaging in solving this meaningful social problem. They became better leaders, they developed the capacity to analyze and solve a problem, to organize to solve it. These are skills that would serve them well for the rest of their lives, no matter what they do. More importantly, they will find continued joy and satisfaction as they proceed on this path of using their talent to solve meaningful challenges.

The second took place in Mexico a few years. I was studying a number of social innovations designed to reduce poverty and discovered a project created by a university student in one of the Universities in the city of Monterrey, in the north of Mexico. In Mexico, university students are expected to spend some time every year during their studies in community

service. This particular student had decided to develop a project that would reduce poverty. He had focused on one community where people were very poor. He spent some time studying what were the causes of poverty, and understood that in this community the poorest people were women who had young children and who could not travel to the factories, which were at some distance, because they had no one to leave their babies with. This student decided that one way to reduce poverty would be to bring work to the communities themselves, so these women did not have to travel. He learned that it was possible to produce liquid soap with very simple technology, and he created a training program, to teach women in these communities how to produce liquid soap. At the end of the training program the women received a loan to have the materials to produce soap at home. I visited some of these women in their homes and witnessed the happiness they drew not just from the income which this activity provided them, but from being able to participate with others in this kind of work. Clearly the university student who created this training program improved the lives of hundreds of very poor people, creating opportunities for them and for their children. But it is also clear that he was the greatest beneficiary of this work because the leadership skills that he gained in the process, the ability to analyze a difficult problem and solve it, the ability to create an organization

to solve the problem, and the joy of being able to address important challenges, will stay with him for the rest of his life as he goes on to do other things.

The third story concerns the creation of a small group of people at a very challenging time in history, over sixty years ago. At the end of world war two, there were many people around the world asking how could we create the conditions to have peace in the world, and to never see the horror and the destruction caused by this war again. A small group of people meeting in San Francisco, decided that one of the ways to guarantee lasting peace would be to create the conditions that guaranteed every person the conditions to live with dignity. So they drafted a short document, containing thirty articles, which identified what those conditions were. This short document, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is one of the most beautiful human creations. I encourage you to read it. This short document changed humanity and made the world more peaceful. One of the articles in this document, article 26, states that education is a basic human right, a right every person has simply because they are human. It was because of this right that the United Nations created a series of specialized institutions, UNESCO and others, to advance that right, and this work transformed humanity. Sixty

years ago the great majority of children around the world did not have the opportunity to enter a school and today they do it and gain a basic education. And this happened because a small group of people, including Eleanor Roosevelt and others, much smaller than the number of you graduating today, made it their business to tackle a big challenge, how to create the conditions that would guarantee lasting peace in the world.

I offer these three examples to remind you of the power of ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things, of your own power to make a meaningful difference in the lives of others and in tackling meaningful challenges.

Allow me now to expand on the last example to illustrate how when we live for purposes bigger than ourselves we stand always on the shoulders of giants, we become part of projects that connect us to the past, to generations before us, and to the future, to generations to come. When Eleanor Roosevelt and others included education as a right in the Universal Declaration, they were advancing an aspiration that had been around for four centuries.

Schools as we know them are a brilliant invention, an institution designed to allow every generation to pass on to the next what it considers valuable... more recently also an institution to equip future generations to invent a future that is better than the past. As an engine of social transformation schools are recent. It was only four centuries ago that Jon Amos Comenius, a Moravian Minister who lived through thirty years of religious based conflict, proposed that all persons should be educated, so people of different beliefs could have the tools to understand and accept one another, so that we could have peace. But this idea, that all persons should be educated, became a reality in some countries less than two centuries ago when Prussia, and later France and England began to support education systems with the aspiration to include all students. In the United States it was only in the 1850s that we created public education systems in some States, as a result of the efforts of Horace Mann, the first secretary of education in Massachusetts. If you think about it, it is truly remarkable that over four centuries, all these individuals collaborated in pursuit of the dream to make it possible for every person to be educated so we could have peace and advance human freedoms. The result of this collaboration across generations and across countries is one of the most dramatic transformations that has taken place in human history, and in many ways our celebration today of your educational accomplishments is

also the result of the efforts of those giants to advance educational opportunity for all. Mr. Enver Yucel and those that with him created Bahcesehir University, and other educational institutions in Turkey to expand educational opportunity, are also standing on the shoulders of giants, extending the dream of Comenius, and connecting with others across generations and across borders so that we can have peace in the world.

Having reminded you of the power of ordinary people to accomplish great things, let me now suggest that all of you graduating today will have even more opportunities than those who came before had, to tackle some of humanities biggest challenges as a result of innovation.

As we speak there are people building spaceships for private air travel. These ships were the result of the X Prize, an approach to stimulate innovation in which everyone is invited to submit a design in response to a challenge. The challenge a few years ago was how to design spaceships for private flight to space. About 40 teams entered the competition, the winner received several million dollars and this is how a company is now busy in the works producing spaceships for private travel. More recently, the X Prize focused on developing an approach to clean oil spills. When the oil spill in

the Gulf of Mexico last year we used the same technologies which had been used to clean up the oil spill of the Exxon Valdes, twenty years ago. About 60 teams entered the competition. What is most interesting about these competitions is that the teams have on average 30 people. Think about what this means, it is now possible for relatively small groups of people to produce the kind of innovation that it took very large private organizations or governments, NASA for instance, to produce. This is because of the spread of knowledge and because of how using technology can transform most industries.

Think about this example. Mobile technology is transforming most sectors, work, social life. I imagine most of you have cell phones, this means that today most of you are better connected to the rest of the world than the President of the United States was twenty years ago. This change is taking place all over the world. In Brazil, for example, most people have cell phones as well. My cell phone has more computing power than the most powerful computer which existed at Harvard University thirty years ago. Today we have supercomputers, that in some respects can perform some tasks better than humans. For instance IBM's Watson supercomputer can produce very accurate medical diagnosis, beating the odds of most doctors who have a 50% change of error in some medical diagnoses. Now imagine



what combining these two technologies can do in helping us tackle one of the most pressing challenges in our time, how to provide all people adequate health care. Combining the power of Watson supercomputer, with cell phones, with some apps, we could provide most people around the world with access to very accurate medical diagnoses. We will have to work out the details of course of how to develop a sustainable business model for this to bring it to the point of an X Prize model to build spaceships or technologies to clean oil, but I believe we will soon be able to do this.

A final example of the power technology gives you to be imaginative and innovative in producing positive change in the world. Four years ago Canadian musician Dave Carroll and his band, Sons of Maxwell was travelling from Halifax to Nebraska. When he arrived he discovered that his Taylor guitar had been broken during the flight. He complained to the airline, United Airlines, but after nine months of failed attempts was unable to received compensation for his damaged guitar, so in 2009, Mr. Carroll placed a short youtube video in which he was singing what had happened to him. Within 24 hours the video had one viral and had been seen by 150,00 people. In three days half a million people had seen the video. United Airlines immediately contacted Mr. Carroll attempting to negotiate a solution. In the meantime the video continued to grow in popularity, in a

little over a month 5 million people had seen it, by February of 2011 10 million people had seen it. You can find it online, it's titled 'United Breaks Guitars'. But what is most interesting is to see the impact of this simple action, placing a video on the internet had. Mr. Carroll received an apology from United Airlines director of customer service and requested permission to use the video for internal training of its employees and indicating that they would learn from the incident and change their customer service policy. The owner of Taylor Guitars donated two guitars to Mr. Taylor. United Airlines made a donation of \$3,000 to an institute of Jazz as a gesture of good will. Carroll became a celebrity receiving invitations to give speeches on customer service. Six months after the incident Time magazine named 'United Breaks Guitars' one of the top 10 viral videos of 2009, and this year Mr. Carroll was featured in a TV documentary on Customer Service. Isn't it remarkable what one short video on the internet can accomplish these days? Changing policy in an entire industry and influence a movement on customer service?

These are the exciting possibilities in front of you, to be able to transform entire industries with the kind of impact I have described. The skills that you have developed in your studies over the last few years will allow you to do this, your knowledge, your ability to use this knowledge to solve real problems, your ability to learn new things, to study hard, your creativity,

your capacity to innovate, your perseverance, your capacity to be entrepreneurial, but especially your ambition to make a difference in improving the world and to never give up, your ability to stay focused on problems that excite you and try to understand them and imagine new and effective ways of tackling them.

Let me conclude with some reflections on what I have learned in my own journey in trying to serve meaningful purposes.

I graduated from college in Caracas, Venezuela, where I was born. I did not know at the time what direction my life would take. None of my parents had gone to University. Both of them worked hard so that I had more educational opportunities than they did, as I'm sure many of your parents have as well. When I went to high school I used to travel two hours each way, in a commute that involved taking two different buses, to go from my home to my high school in Caracas. From my home I had to travel several hours by bus to visit the nearest public library. In high school I had become fascinated with the field of education, not just my own but with what education could do to expand the imagination and the opportunities of all people. It was that curiosity to learn and that interest in service that gave me the courage to

apply to college even though I did not fully know what I was getting into. In college my professors and my classmates continued to provide opportunities for me. It was that generosity that helped me discover possibilities I had not considered. I was able to assist some professors in their teaching and in their research, it was in this way that I published some of my first research papers. I became fascinated by the research of a Harvard Professor, and this interest led me to study English, so I could read his work without having to await for translations. One of my classmates suggested that I should go to Harvard to study English over a summer. I did this and had the pleasure of meeting this professor whose work I admired. Another professor there encouraged me to apply to graduate school there.

I ended going to graduate school at Harvard, to study how to improve education on a very large scale, not in one school, but in an entire nation. After graduating I worked for several years in an institute at Harvard that provided advice to government officials around the world about how to improve education. I spent eight years doing educational research and working with government officials interested in improving education in Pakistan, in Egypt, Jordan, in Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Colombia, Mexico, Paraguay, Chile, trying to understand what were the barriers that

stood in the way of allowing children and young people the opportunity to develop their talent, and working with governments to remove those barriers. I then worked at the World Bank supporting efforts of governments around the world to improve schools. Fourteen years ago I became a Professor at Harvard, where I now direct a masters program and teach students who want to work to improve education around the world. There are hundreds of them now creating and managing educational programs in Africa, Asia, the Middle East, in Latin America and also in the United States. Their work fills me with gratitude for the opportunity to have spent a little time with them while they were at Harvard, learning together how to tackle these important and challenging issues. I have drawn great joy and satisfaction from working with others who are trying to advance Comenius dream, the dream that all persons should be educated so we can have peace in the world, and I have been able to do this because I was lucky that so many people helped me see possibilities I could not have seen without them, but also because they helped me understand the significance of a dream much bigger than myself and the power of standing on the shoulders of giants to advance this dream.

You are all extremely fortunate to be graduating from University today, at a time when your skills, technology and the context in which you are living give you unprecedented opportunities to be entrepreneurial in finding innovative solutions to some of the greatest challenges we face. I hope you make the choice to use your freedoms and your power in this way, not only because this will give you the greatest happiness, but also because your privileges give you this responsibility, because life is short and because there are indeed important and urgent challenges we share, in this small home we call earth, that will remain unsolved unless you do your share, unless you take yourselves seriously. I know there are children in Turkey and in the rest world who will be unable to get a good education unless some of you decide to do something about it. I know there are people in Turkey and in the world who will have poor health unless some of you decide to do something about it. I know there are places in the world, where people will suffer as a result of environmental challenges unless some of you decide to do something about it. I know there are places in this world where people will suffer the violence of political conflict unless some of you decide to do something about it.

I have come today to invite you to make your lives matter. Whether you choose to work through business, as an inventor, as a scientist, as an artist, in sports, through service in government or other professions, or as a social entrepreneur, I hope your actions will be guided by purposes bigger than yourselves, by the purpose to leave this good earth a little better than you found it upon arrival. I know you can do it, that you can make your life matter. Please join me in thanking your parents, your families, your professors and staff at Bahcesehir University, and all those who have sustained you in your journey and brought you to this beautiful day, and make their love and pride remind you that you stand on the shoulders of giants and sustain you in making good choices for the rest of that journey.

Congratulations!