

Happiness is about true responsibility

**Keynote speech by Dr. Sandro Calvani ¹
at the graduation ceremony of Webster University,
Hua Hin, Thailand, May 15th, 2011**

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The personal opinions in this speech do not necessarily represent those of the mentioned Institutions

The most important discovery in attaining happiness is that you are your best resource

The first thing which came to my mind when I received Prof. Ratish Thakur's kind invitation to speak to you tonight was this same moment in my life 35 years ago: the very moment of my own graduation in biology and life sciences. A very powerful truth came out of my studies in microbiology and human genetics: the deeper and deeper you peer into a microscope, the smallest parts of a whole are always the very essence of any bigger thing or life. No matter if you study an elephant, a tiny bacteria or a galaxy in the outer space, everything, every whole, is made of its tiny parts.

I felt that I owned that truth very close to my heart, to my own existence and to my reason for living. Then, on that graduation night on May 25th, 1976, I promised to myself that I would never stop my studies. I promised to grow every day of my adult life and to understand better **the biggest mystery of science on Earth, which is human life.**

In simple words I was following my inner feeling that my way to live a happy life was to know myself. To me this meant I first had to understand the whole of humankind of which I always felt to be a tiny part. My life as an international public servant and a United Nations diplomat offered me one of the windows with the best view of the past four decades of humankind's struggles. I think that living and working close to the worst conflicts, disasters, crimes, and abuses of human rights in modern history has given me a unique opportunity to peer into the future of mankind.

The future is practically all that truly matters for you tonight. Now that you have finished the preparatory phase of your life, the next phase will be the second most important time, a time in which you will decide the fate of your being on this planet.

I wish to encourage you to be deeply convinced that every small part matters, and that every one of you will have some impact on what the world will become in this century. This is probably the most important inner truth that I would like to instill in your memory tonight. **Everyone is unique and irreplaceable** in this global puzzle of humankind made up of 6.5 billion pieces. You must strive to find the right position of your unique personal life story. Steve Jobs recently articulated this as principle number one of an effective and happy person. In a very inspiring phrase he said: **Your time is limited,**

so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma, which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition. They somehow already know what you truly want to become. Everything else is secondary." Think deeply about this concept, feel it, experience it, believe in it and make every effort to live it together with the people whom you love.

Every life will be unique means also that every venture starting tonight will be different. The future is where you will be protagonist, either as leaders, team members or as humble followers. That future can be seen also as the crowded crossroads of fundamental human questions- where you will get a green light to happiness or a red light to irrelevance.

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I believe strongly that there is a way to make a happy difference in the tangled hank of this beginning of a new century and of a new millennium. Yes, everybody knows and feels it, we are all part of the same dough of more than 6 billion particles, we are all connected, not only all peoples, all cultures, all religions, all genders, all classes, but even all generations, including those who are not born yet. We will either grow together in harmony or we will be unhappy and - in a way or another - we will be poor together.

Since time immemorial young generations have been the salt and the yeast for the dough of societies to grow on time. Indeed, your generation has a very special and unique opportunity. You grew up at the end of the past century and saw well, with the innocent and intellectually honest eyes of children, what was going wrong in this world. You became young adults and new graduates at the beginning of a new century when the decisions for adaptive change must be taken to re-design and reset the governance of global public goods.

Gebreselassie and Halafi

I have witnessed hundreds of real human stories which have proved and strengthened my belief in global togetherness and interdependence, and that nobody can be an island either of happiness

or of death in this world. I wish to tell you one of these stories which struck me most, and have been the cornerstone of my very happy life.

In October 1984, as a junior manager of Caritas, a non-governmental foreign aid agency, I was tasked to command one of the very first deliveries of food aid to the famine stricken Ethiopia. I landed in Makallè in Tigray heading a squad of four large-haul relief flights, each carrying 20 tons of essential food aid. It was not one of my first encounters with human misery and desperation. However that time the scene was too much to bear, even for a specialist of humanitarian relief operations. While landing I saw a very large mass of almost naked people moving slowly very close to the airstrip. As soon as we opened the doors of the cargo plane I saw something unbelievable: fifty thousand people, women, men, children and elders with absolutely nothing more than their bodies shrunken by hunger and thirst, no shoes, not a bag or a clean cloth, not a single hat or a bucket. They all stared at me and to my team, in absolute silence, not a word, not a gesture, not a move. A few minutes of absolute silence were for me an eternity.

In those few moments I felt all possible strong emotions striking me as lightnings and thunder. I was terribly sorry and angry to have only 80 tons of food aid. I was unprepared for that scenario, I was moved by pity and fear, I was close to panicking.

Then I remembered the live cells in my young scientist's microscope "we are part of a whole" and, all of a sudden, I felt at ease. With a loud speaker I invited a few of the needy people who could speak English to come closer to us under the planes and to request the mass of others to please wait a few minutes. A young student among them, Gebreselassie, spoke first, and after shaking our hands said: "Sir, the bad news you can see with your eyes: here we have four dead people every hour. The good news now is that either we live together or we die together. If you do not give up, we will never give up." I hugged him. Then I promised to call for more aid in the next days and asked two questions: whether they were able to distribute that aid fast and effectively and how long it would have lasted. In a few minutes we saw everybody smiling and chanting for happiness. We had built a rapport of trust and of cooperation. The replies were sharp. "Yes, we can distribute. Eighty tons will last a week, or maybe less if more people will continue to arrive from the Tigray".

We realized fast that the situation was much worse than expected. By radio we informed the

embassies of major countries in the capital city Addis Ababa. In a matter of a few days a massive relief operation was mounted which included air-dropping and parachuting food into remote locations. The BBC gave six minutes on their TV News and the world reacted fast. All major military powers participated with heavy air force support. The operation - the first one in history where European, American, Soviet Union and Japanese forces co-operated under a joint command - was called "Saint Bernard", a race of dogs trained to bring relief items in case of emergency to wounded mountaineers in the Italian Alps. But the day of the beginning of the operation, a Soviet General radioed his veto to launch it because -he vehemently complained - the Soviet Union Air Force could not co-operate under the name of a Saint. We immediately told him that Saint Bernard was actually a dog. He was very happy and became fully co-operative. In the following months a fairly well co-ordinated international relief operation built hospitals and large relief camps. But very large relief funds were needed.

I convinced a journalist friend of mine to give me three minutes on prime time news on the national TV and I told the Italian people the same story I am telling you now. It was the night of Christmas Eve in 1984. In the following five days my NGO received donations equivalent to 25 million dollars. Gebreselassie became a young volunteer for relief work, continued his studies at the Don Bosco school of Makallè and grew up as a good leader and a good friend of mine. During the following ten years of war he lost his parents, left the country and became a refugee orphan in Canada. He later married. To announce his marriage he sent me a message where he wrote "I can't stop true love to grow around me." When he got his first baby girl he called her "Halafi" which in Amharic means Responsible. In the message to announce Halafi's birth he wrote that it was a short summary of a story I knew well and that ideally Halafi was conceived in October 1984.

I am sure we shall have many more well educated and responsible people re-born after graduation tonight. Responsibility in its ordinary meaning includes the "commitment to respond to an event and to evaluate conscientiously the duties and consequences in conflicting decisions". In the twentieth century the notion of accountability became a key concept of ethics. U.S President Barack Obama, in his inaugural address, called for "a new era of responsibility". The global challenges for responsible leaders are truly of unprecedented magnitude and importance. Environmental risks,

global crime, climate change, natural disasters with human-made consequences, new wars, failing states, migrations, and struggles for access to water and energy might destabilize the world in such a way that the recent tsunami in Japan and the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico would seem just peanuts in comparison. **We need a new generation of responsible women and men capable and willing to govern better the global public goods.**

The sociologist Max Weber proposed an “ethic of responsibility”. The Declaration for a Global Ethics of the Parliament of World Religions (Chicago 1993)¹, states that **“self-determination and self-realization are thoroughly legitimate so long as they are not separated from human self-responsibility and from global responsibility, that is, from responsibility for fellow humans and for the planet Earth”**.

Modern transformation of society and globalization require more human responsibility than ever before. It is not a supreme duty above knowledge, science, technology, industrial and technological development or democracy. But yes, it is an absolute value of humankind to be re-discovered and put at the center of everybody's life. Hans Kung suggests that such new ethics of responsibility should articulate in various new expressions of humanity such as imagination, sensitivity, respect, emotionality, warmth, delicacy, and respect.

The world needs you to be a new kind of woman and man.

Are you ready for such big changes of attitudes? Charles Darwin suggested that **it is not the most intelligent or the strongest species that survives, but the one most adapted to change**. If so, then our species of *Homo Sapiens* (which in Latin means Intelligent or Wise) might change to become more responsible to itself and to others, evolving into a self-improved human being who wishes to become *Homo Sollicitus*, (in Latin: “Responsible and willing to take care of others”).

Believe me, responsibility is the best foundation of a happy life. Do not listen to those who ridicule responsibility saying that it is an attitude for Saints. It is not. Responsibility is instead something that at times even dogs can perform when well trained. Do not be afraid of the thousands of daunting difficulties that you will encounter in real life starting tomorrow. Do not even dare to think that you are unprepared. Learn to enjoy inspiring silence. Remain close to friends you meet, especially those met in a moment of desperate need. Let love grow around you, nurture respect and tolerance for all... and become truly *Halafi*, truly responsible. NEVER, NEVER, NEVER GIVE UP.

Thank you!

¹[Http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf](http://www.parliamentofreligions.org/_includes/FCKcontent/File/TowardsAGlobalEthic.pdf)