

JUST LEADERSHIP

Culmination Speech Jewish School of Community Service: HUC LA August, 2009

It is an honor for me to be here today. Thanks to Richard Siegel and his faculty and to the graduates, I have a chance to meet/talk/discuss and debate with them—over the last few days—the challenges we all face in the world, in this country and in our own Jewish community. I am indebted to all of them for that opportunity, which makes me feel as if I know them and understand some of their challenges. I am also tremendously appreciative of the change to speak with all of you.

I want, first, to share a few words with the families and then speak directly to the graduates. I will not be talking to the graduates about their next year or about their next jobs OR about the certain vast contribution that we all know they will make to the field of Jewish communal service. That is a given.

I will be talking to them about the roles we need them to play in the world. First, as deliverers of service with the capacity to not only do, but dream, to not only dream, but act. Then,

about their obligation to be Jewish leaders and help our community meet its 21st century obligations. Most important, I will be talking to all of them and all of you about their and our current and future roles as seekers of greater justice in the Jewish community, in the US and in the world.

A special word of congratulations first to the partners, parents, and friends of these graduates. I confer on you the degree PST, Putting Someone Through, and I know the graduates join me in thanking you for the many ways in which you have supported them.

And now, to the graduates: I hope you will embrace your profession and work to change your society. Take risks. Be bold, courageous and strong. Do not settle for what you know is not good enough.

Remember, you are what you do. Not what you think or what you want or what you dream. You are what you do.

You are the people who will shape the next century of our community, of our country and of our world. The community has challenges well known to all of you. The country is coping

with crises of health care, of education, of economic downturn and of international threat. And unfortunately the world is broken, a world of extreme poverty and obscene wealth, a world of growing and dangerous inequality, a world in which, as astonishing as this sounds, the 500 richest people earn more than the 416 million poorest. This is a world which offends our commitment to fairness and insults our belief in justice.

All these inequities are further challenged by the current global recession. There are people we may know who have suffered the loss of jobs, health coverage and retirement savings. We must try to help them maintain their dignity and self worth and continue to contribute in and to their communities.

There are others we may know whose investment portfolios have shrunk. They might think their lives have been substantially altered -- and in some ways they are right -- but for many of the world's poorest [always a piece of my concern] shrinkage in their portfolio means going from one meal a day to none.

When we have less money than we used to have, it hurts; it may limit our options and it can damage our sense of self. But we must remember that money is not everything. It is a tool. Our values and our integrity are the true essence of who we are as individuals and as a society, and we cannot let them diminish because our financial resources have shrunk.

We will be judged ultimately more by our values than by our monetary value. And there is no value more important than working to improve the way things are.

When you counsel a family with immense health care problems or work in a Jewish organization that is coping with many health crises in its own country, you realize that the system of health care in this country must change. When you help cope with the life situation of many of our immigrant families suffering from gross inequities in the law, you know that system needs repair. When you work with young people who are languishing in our schools through no fault of their own, then you realize that service is critical but not sufficient, that advocacy is needed to change the way things are, to make the country—and then the world—a more just place. generation successfully.

I hope that as you shape your lives and build your futures you will do this work, that you will choose to act for justice.

Engage the problems that threaten the future of our nation and the world, and embrace a responsibility to people in need, both in our own country and around the world. Do it at any and every job site, do it as a voter, do it in the community where you live and do it as an individual seeking that higher sense of self. This is our 21st century challenge.

It is really very much a question of how you use the resources you have -- of money, yes, but also of values, commitment, energy, time, leadership and organizing skill -- to make a difference.

There are, as you all know, myriad national and global problems, some of which I have already mentioned. But the worst consequences of today's growing national and global inequity are seen in the eyes of the children, those neglected in our own communities and those dying of hunger and disease throughout the world; the children here or there whose futures are being unfairly curtailed as we sit here this afternoon.

Permit me some words about them because they are our future.

In our own country -- still, by far, the richest country in the world, where 12 million children were below the poverty line last year -- the assumption is that 17 million children will have fallen below that line by the end of this year, their families coping with unemployment, rising food costs and the disappearance of affordable housing. It is for these children, regardless of religion or race, that the LA federation is launching a hunger initiative.

Globally, children of every race and nationality have the same problems, but they are of an almost unimaginably larger magnitude. There are 27,000 children a day -- yes 27,000 children a day -- who lose their lives to an abject poverty which is both a cause and an effect of hunger and disease.

There is no easy way to say this and no easy way to hear it. But I pray that you do hear it, and that you do not retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed. Let me repeat that: We cannot retreat to the convenience of being overwhelmed. There is work for us to do, and these children—and our

communities, our country and the world—need our commitment if we are not to lose more of them to inequity and injustice.

For the first time in history, the world has the knowledge, the resources and the capacity to move all people out of poverty, to effect change in every corner of the globe. The question is whether we will all take part in this effort both individually and collectively, whether we will bend our minds and our voices, our energies and our material resources to helping the other and the stranger and to pursuing justice.

Those of you receiving your certificates today—whatever your background, your area of expertise, your life work and experience to date, your plans for your future—are on a path to positions where you can influence and redirect people's lives. You have made many life choices and faced many challenges to get to this day.

What I wish for you is the capacity and the determination to keep making choices, to keep challenging yourselves, and to strive against many obstacles to live your faith and your values. My hope is that you take to heart the teaching of

Gandhi that you must be the change you hope to see in the world. That is the only moral course of action for these times.

We can act individually. Think for a minute of what contact you have had with other countries and their citizens since you woke this morning. Did you drink coffee or cocoa made from beans picked in the developing world? Do you know where every article of your clothing was made? We can respond, paying attention to what we eat, where we buy our coffee and our clothes, whose employment benefits we protect, how we limit our impact on the environment, what we do with our time and our money to strengthen these connections for good.

We can act institutionally. What new programs of education or action will our Jewish institutions commit to? How will they treat their employees? What new opportunities will they create for their constituents? And what roles will you play in making this happen?

We can act collectively, at the governmental level, to ensure that the world's industrialized nations invest in creating greater equity. We can start with that health care legislation or that immigration reform or that work for better school

systems. We can urge our government to provide full forgiveness on debt owed by developing countries, surely a Jewish think to do.

We can ask governments to dismantle trade agreements that allow countries and corporations to become wealthier at the expense of the world's poor. And, for the price of two months of the war in Iraq each year, we could put all children in school, eliminate avoidable infant death, wipe out malaria and cut global poverty in half by 2015.

We can stand against genocide wherever it occurs. We can organize to fight global hunger from the ground up, securing land title, aiding African and Central American farmers, passing new legislation.

What is required, first, is that we embrace our responsibility to humanity, commit to help those with whom we do not share a faith or a neighborhood, a country, a language, or a political structure.

What is required, next, is that we keep these intentions front and center in our own lives. As you build your life, as you

create the person you will be, keep your eye on the pursuit of justice. Own the problems, accept responsibility and commit to work for change.

Do not do this work by yourself. Step forward, get involved and then exercise your power to mobilize, to organize, to convince others. Be inclusive, build a community of activists, and convey a sense of hope and possibility to those with whom you work.

And undertake these efforts with a mixture of patience, of hope and of fun. Understand the often complex, always too slow, ways to get from here to there. Sustain hope, the ingredient that keeps us going when we might otherwise quit. And don't forget the fun. If we want joy and friendship and laughter at the end of the struggle then we must have them along the way.

That is what I wish for all of you and for all of us. Hone your political will and your moral determination. Act with integrity. Build a better world for all children, wherever they live. The child in a homeless shelter in LA or the child holding an empty bowl in the slums of Delhi might one day cure Parkinson's disease or stop global warming.

Be of service, but remember: being of service is not sufficient. Help tackle the root causes of injustice, plan for larger social action, demand new policies and appropriations, and embrace advocacy.

Think for a minute of your grandparents or great-grandparents. I am certain the vast majority of them could not have imagined the level of affluence and influence in our American Jewish community. If they were here, wouldn't they ask us what we were doing with this significant degree of wealth and power? Similarly, we must ask ourselves, "what do we want to tell our children and grandchildren when they ask us how we used our resources to make a difference in hard times?"

So move outside your comfort zones—literally and figuratively. Think innovatively. Inspire those you will lead to take the freedom we won as a people and use it to enhance the freedom of others. Make us a Jewish community built on moral principle and dedicated to the pursuit of justice.

Heed the observation of Rabbi Heschel, who has had the greatest influence on me, that "living is not a private affair of

the individual, it is what we do with God's time, what we do with God's world". Accept the challenge to do the most you can with your time in this world, constructing lives of commitment where acts of loving kindness and acts of political courage are woven into the fabric of your days.

And remember, as you embark on this work, to keep in mind the wisdom from Pirke Avot which teaches that we are not required to complete the task but cannot refuse to participate.

This same thought was very powerfully expressed by the faith leader who inspired the peasants with whom we work in El Salvador. Let me close with those words from Archbishop Oscar Romero:

**We accomplish in our lifetime
Only a tiny fraction of
The magnificent enterprise
That is god's work.**

This is what we are about.

**We plant seeds
That one day will grow.**

**We water the seeds already planted
Knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that
Will need further development...**

**We may never see
The end results,
But that is the difference...**

**We are prophets
Of a future not our own.**