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The Valuable Inconvenience of Leadership: A Message for the Class of 2009

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As graduation season rolls around once again, it is time to ask the new crop of bright and eager graduates to consider an important challenge. The immense problems the world faces require every graduate to engage in what I call "the valuable inconvenience of leadership." Class of 2009, will you accept this challenge?

Let me explain: Old knowledge is continuously giving way to new understandings, and we must be ready to rethink what we thought we had learned. Then, we must be courageous enough to act on that new knowledge. One quick example: Recently, scientists discovered that our familiar picture of the heart as a four-chambered organ was incorrect; a heart is actually one long muscle band wound into a double twist. This one discovery forces us to rethink completely our current ideas and methods for preventing and treating coronary artery disease. As a scientist or physician trained to believe in the four-chambers, how willing will you be to rethink the treatments that you have so carefully learned? That is, indeed, inconvenient.

To have the power and strength to challenge the wisdom of the day, new graduates need to become the leaders of the future. Before they do, however, they need to recognize that leadership means more responsibility, less privilege. Good leadership calls for more character, less charisma.

Some leaders promise to keep us safe and provide whatever we need. All we have to do is accept unquestioningly their vision, their values, their beliefs, and their strategies. These toxic leaders insist that they will do all the heavy lifting while we go about our more pleasurable business.

Good leaders won't promise to handle everything while we pursue our dreams. More often, good leaders ask us to set aside the activities in which we are happily immersed to take on our fair share of the leadership burdens. They don't offer us free lunch. Rather, they expect us to cook the meal and clean up, as well.

I challenge today's graduates to become good leaders. But it won't be easy. They will need to engage in the "valuable inconvenience of leadership." There is an inconvenience in being challenged to move in new directions. It's tempting to avoid those extra chores of running for city council, serving on juries, and volunteering at the voting stations. Let someone else do it, you might say. Yet, blindly following leaders who promise to do the hard work for us is a dangerous choice. Besides, simply accepting those illusions -- for that is what they are -- of protection, happiness, and ennoblement keeps us from meeting our own responsibilities as leaders.

Good leaders challenge us with other inconveniences, as well. They urge us to matriculate in what the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard called the "school of anxiety," where we learn and grow in ways we never could if we remain cocooned in the false safety of illusions. The process is painful both for leaders and constituents. In fact, these leaders may insist upon shattering even those illusions we create for ourselves. Still, it must be done if we are to make progress.

The "valuable inconvenience of leadership" also makes us face life head on. It calls us to live authentically. Only when we are living on the verge of uncertainty, making our best judgments as we venture out into the unknown, into that unfinished world where what we think we know changes in the blink of an eye, shall we avoid a greater danger. Goethe called that the danger of living too safely, wrapped in the blanket of our illusions.

The "valuable inconvenience of leadership" requires us not simply to put our knowledge and strengths to the test, but to put them at the service of others. The graduating Class of 2009 has been privileged to learn in great American colleges and universities. As they leave the stage, diplomas in hand, these new graduates have a life-determining choice to make: Either they can take this privilege and use it solely to enhance their own lives and those of their dear ones. OR they can use it primarily in the name of a larger, less privileged majority, who exist around the globe.

Using the learning symbolized by their diplomas and the unanticipated knowledge the Class of 2009 is bound to encounter, our graduates can help to move this unfinished world several steps forward. By accepting the "valuable inconvenience of leadership," they may also address the challenge laid down by the renowned educator Horace Mann, who said: "Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity."

Happy graduation, Class of 2009!
