

Preserving the Open Society

Speech by Professor Richard C Levin, Graduation Speaker at the Yale-NUS College Inaugural Graduation Ceremony 29 May 2017 at University Cultural Centre

1. Members of the inaugural Yale-NUS College Class of 2017, congratulations! We celebrate your achievements. You have completed a course of study of uncommon rigour, and you have fulfilled the potential we saw in you when you took the enormous risk of applying to a brand new and unproven institution four years ago. As pioneers, your achievements extend far beyond the classroom. Through your own initiative you have created and shaped the culture of this place, leaving a legacy for the classes that follow. You will always be remembered not merely as the first graduates, but also as co-architects of this great College.
2. I want to offer special congratulations to the parents who are here today. You also took a big risk in sending your brilliant and accomplished children to this entirely new enterprise when they had many other college choices. We thank you for your courage, and we hope that your confidence in this College has been amply repaid.
3. For me, this occasion is deeply meaningful. Eight years ago, in Davos, the imaginative and incomparable President of NUS, Tan Chorh Chuan, approached Linda Lorimer and me with the proposition that we join forces in the creation of a model liberal arts college for the 21st century. As representatives of Yale, whose graduates founded a substantial fraction of the liberal arts colleges in America during the 19th century, we saw this as a rare and extraordinary opportunity – a chance for Yale to join forces with the finest university in Asia to create an institution that could enrich the world: a community of learning, founded by two great universities, in Asia, for the world.
4. Many faces familiar to you took part in the four years of detailed planning between that first meeting and your matriculation. Yale Vice President Linda Lorimer and NUS Professor Lily Kong, now Provost of Singapore Management University, led the effort. President Pericles Lewis, President-elect Tan Tai Yong, as well as Professors Bailyn, Bishop, Kang, Khoo, and Patke, were active in framing the curriculum and then hiring the initial cohort of faculty a full year ahead of admitting your class. During a final planning year in New Haven, the inaugural faculty worked out the details of your unique curriculum, which they and the other scholars who joined later have so effectively implemented.
5. I want to underscore my thanks to the faculty. You, too, are pioneers. You have not only developed, with Herculean effort, an important and distinctive curriculum for this College; you have also blazed a trail that we hope will be followed by countless institutions around the globe. By keeping faith in what you have built, and maintaining the distinctive nature of the Common Curriculum, you will influence the course of liberal arts education throughout the world, and you will determine the long-term success of the College.
6. You, the members of the inaugural class, gave life to what was for the first four years of our journey an inspiring idea: a community of scholars from around the world, brought together in this island nation that links East Asia with India, Africa, and Europe, to study and learn what it means to become a citizen in the 21st century. You came from Australia, Canada, China, Colombia, Germany, India, Indonesia, Italy, Japan, Malaysia, the Philippines, Russia, Spain, Sweden, the United Kingdom, the United States, Vietnam, and Singapore. You were the first to experience and help to evolve a common curriculum uniquely designed to compare and contrast the distinctive philosophical and literary traditions of Asian and Western civilizations, as well as their social institutions. Your common curriculum gave you the same classic benefits reaped by generations of students in programmes such as Yale's Directed Studies, Chicago's Core Curriculum, Columbia's Contemporary Civilization, and St. John's Great Books curriculum. You learned to read closely, to formulate arguments, to defend them, and to refine them in response to better arguments. In short, you have become educated persons in the manner articulated so clearly in the 19th century by Cardinal Newman. You are independent thinkers. You have learned, in Newman's words, "to see things as they are, to go right to the point, to disentangle a skein of thought, to detect what is sophistical, and to discard what is irrelevant."⁷¹ Your education, as Newman continues, "prepares [you] to fill any post with credit, and to master any subject with facility."⁷²
7. And you have learned something more. You have been pioneers in extending the Great Conversation of Western Civilization – studied so thoroughly in the excellent programmes at Yale, Chicago, Columbia, and St. John's – to a

conversation among cultures with different origins, different histories, and different perspectives on human experience. Your immersion in the ideas and institutions of both Asia and the West has prepared you to negotiate a world of diverse cultures.

8. Linking the old idea of a common curriculum with the new imperative of cross-cultural understanding was at the centre of our founding vision. It was inspired by a particular view of what the 21st century seemed to hold in store: a world that, despite the diversity of its peoples, was bound together by instantaneous communication and an ever-increasing freedom of movement of goods, services, ideas, and people. In such a world, a deep understanding of the value of different perspectives, mutual respect, and the ability to communicate cross-culturally seemed to us the indispensable tools of an educated person.

9. That vision – of a world inextricably bound together, interdependent, and on the path to peaceful and prosperous coexistence – is under threat today. Even as macroeconomic indicators began to signal recovery from the financial crisis of the 2008, they could not conceal the strains that three decades of technology-led growth and trade liberalization had induced. The same technological innovations that brought us together created disparities in income and wealth to a degree not seen in over a century. And these disparities have triggered populist and anti-globalist reaction around the world: the reversal of liberalisation in Russia and Turkey, increasing nationalism in China and India, the decision of the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, and the election of Donald Trump in the United States. Even in countries where the majority has rejected populism and xenophobia – such as the Netherlands, France and Germany – anti-globalist sentiment is much stronger than a decade ago.

10. Chillingly, the new anti-globalist populism calls to mind the authoritarian nationalism that arose in Europe nearly a century ago in the years between the two world wars. In Italy and Germany, fascism found its initial support among the economically disadvantaged and dispossessed. And, to unite those elements with a broader middle class, the blame for national distress was externalised. Hitler blamed the Jews; Trump and the European populists seek to banish Muslims, or at least bar their further immigration. If you need to be convinced of the similarities in both doctrine and methods between contemporary populist nationalism and European totalitarianism of the 1930s, I would suggest that you read *On Tyranny: Twenty Lessons from the Twentieth Century*, by the distinguished Yale historian, Timothy Snyder.³ It is available online.

11. Four years at Yale-NUS College have taught you that the claims of the new anti-globalist populism need to be subjected to critical scrutiny, just as the claims of globalist, free trade ideology must also be. As citizens of the 21st century, you need to take this responsibility seriously. The stakes are too high; disengagement is not an option for those, like you, who have benefitted from the privilege of superior education.

12. My own parsing of these issues is straightforward. First, the opening of borders to the movement of goods, services, ideas, and people is not the principal source of widening disparities in income and wealth; technology is primarily responsible. And if we wish to mitigate the adverse effects of technology on the distribution of income and wealth, increased educational opportunity and redistributive tax and transfer policies are the answers – not closing borders. Second, the scapegoating of a particular religion – or race or ethnicity – is a path that can lead only to tragedy.

13. Your education was conceived on the premise that humanity is one interconnected whole, and that its rich and welcome diversity must be studied and appreciated to enable you to contribute meaningfully to its progress.

14. Women and men of the Yale-NUS College Class of 2017: You are pioneers, and your role in shaping this exceptional institution will never be forgotten. As you move on, I hope that you will remain pioneers – open to exploring new directions and willing to forge distinctive careers that are right for each of you. You enter a world in which the premises on which Yale-NUS was founded are under attack. You cannot hide from this reality. You must think the issues through for yourself, but I would urge you to stand up for openness and toleration. Be leaders. Teach the world that if we are to survive and prosper on this small, interconnected, and ecologically fragile planet, we must transcend the issues that divide us and assert our common humanity.

¹ John Henry Cardinal Newman, *The Idea of a University*, edited by Martin J. Svaglic, Notre Dame: Notre Dame University Press, 1960, Discourse VII.

² *Ibid.*

³ Timothy Snyder, *On Tyranny*, New York: Tim Duggan Press, 2017.