

“The Spirit of Resilience”

by

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Boston Clemente Course in the Humanities

Graduation Exercises

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[I’d like to dedicate these remarks to my great aunt, Angeline Bottillo, the beloved matriarch of my family, who we laid to rest this morning in Albany, New York—for it is when another life ends that we come to appreciate the meaning of our own lives more fully.]

Dear Clemente Scholars, Faculty, Friends, Family, Community:

Perhaps it’s obvious to many of you that I like to eat.

Fortunately, I was raised, on my mother’s side, in a very large Italian family. Some of my fondest memories of childhood took place on the weekends, usually Saturdays, when my grandmother, Yolanda, and her three sisters—Virginia, Annie, and the late Angeline—would spend the entire day making macaroni from scratch. All of the grandchildren—what seemed like dozens of cousins—were there, too.

It was a Sabbath of sorts, a day of rest for our parents, their children, who worked very hard all week to make ends meet. These were days we all looked forward to, old and young alike, because they were chock full of love and laughter, songs and stories, family and food—all of it bearing the mark of a journey that began in a very old world and continued on in this more modern one. At the end of these days, our grandmothers would load us up with big containers of homemade pasta and sauce and meatballs and send us home to our parents. We ate like kings and queens all week, and we always had something to look forward to the next weekend. I miss those days.

We didn't have much money growing up—we were certainly *not* kings and queens—but we always seemed to have more than enough food. Whenever I would complain to my parents that I wished we were rich—citing as evidence the fact that I didn't have this toy or that video game—my mother would remind me: “Honey, we're rich enough to have dinner together every night.” It would take some time before I would fully appreciate just how rich—and how lucky—we really were. Family dinners at a reasonable hour are few and far between these days. And I doubt I'm the only one.

On Monday night—as a celebration of another successful year,

our seventh, of the Boston Clemente Course in the Humanities—we had a potluck supper at 450 Washington Street, the Codman Square Health Center building where we’ve been meeting two nights a week since October.

Truth be told, I was upset about the potluck—not because I didn’t think you all could cook (I know better than that!) but because for the last two years, I’ve hosted a party for Clemente graduates over at Harvard, the other place where I teach. Budget cuts being what they are, we simply didn’t have enough money to do it this year. But we didn’t want to cancel the tradition, so we decided to have a potluck here in Dorchester instead.

As it turns out, the event was a magnificent feast of ribs and greens, corn bread and potato salad, beef patties and curried chicken, rice and beans, and so much more. As I ate and ate (and ate), what struck me most was not the quality or quantity of food—though it was delicious and there was certainly a lot of it—but how *meaningful* the food was. Take, for instance, Angela’s Jamaican beef patties, which reminded Dianne of Carnival in Trinidad—of nights years ago spent drinking rum punch and dancing ‘til dawn. Or Antoinette, who was utterly exhausted from making her ribs, but not too exhausted to

make sure that I tasted her father's famous BBQ sauce, a recipe that evidently made him some money back in the day. If you tasted it, you'd know why. Or the two kinds of collard greens that inspired Julia and Sophia to compare how they like to prepare their own greens at home. Their conversation reminded me of a trip I made to Alabama more than a decade ago, when my first taste of greens made me believe in God all over again. Then there was Denzil's curried chicken—a late arrival to the party, no doubt to let all that flavor soak in—which got us talking about the curried goat my little brother's mother used to make after church back in the day. She, too, traces her roots back to Jamaica, just like Denzil and Angela and Alex. And then there's Jack Cheng, our fabled art historian—not from Jamaica, as far as I know—who spent the whole afternoon trying to make sure his kids didn't eat the strawberry cream pies he bought for dessert.

In the middle of the dinner, I asked where the term “pot luck” comes from, and Julia—our philosopher-queen—replied: “Everyone brings a pot, and you hope you get lucky with the food that's in it.” Lucky for us, I didn't cook a thing; I brought the drinks. I never did learn how to make pasta and sauce like grandma and her sisters. Alas, when it comes to culinary skill, my Irish side tends to dominate.

But fortunately, that also means I'm pretty fun at a party. And good thing because nothing quite kills the mood of a fancy feast like a pot of boiled potatoes!

On Monday, we did more than just eat. We broke bread—and in breaking bread, we gave of ourselves and shared our stories. Like those Saturdays I used to spend with grandma and her three sisters, Monday was a real family affair, one made necessary by a limited budget, but nurtured by abundant creativity, talent, and love. It, too, made us appreciate just how rich we all are.

We may have ended the year by breaking bread, but we spent the year breaking books. Not destroying them, of course—we do not do that in a democracy—but breaking them open, diving in, getting lost in strange stories and peculiar perspectives, searching for new meanings amidst ancient truths, interpreting art and examining photographs, challenging orthodoxy and finding our voice.

At the very beginning of the year, I told you how important it is to me that we provide you with all the books you need to make your way in this course. We gave you lots of books—big and small, ancient and modern, some you'd heard of and others you hadn't—and we insisted that you read them, not all of them at once (though it may

have seemed that way sometimes), but slowly over the course of the year. Now those books are yours. They are part of you. And you are part of them.

Among the many images of this year's class that will remain with me for some time, two really stand out: first, our dynamic duo, Lois and Antoinette, rolling their suitcases, filled with these books, to class each night as if they were on their way to Logan airport; and the second, another dynamic duo, Denzil and Cleopatra, who would enter the room with their arms groaning from the weight of all the books they *thought* they *might* need on any given Monday or Wednesday. But these four were not alone in the love they displayed for books this year. As we honor these thirteen graduates tonight, let us also stop to recognize the creation of thirteen more individual libraries. There's no stopping the Humanities!

In the fall, I asked these students to come with me on a journey—an odyssey of sorts. I told them that the Humanities were essential to living in a complex world. I told them that studying Art History, Literature, Writing, Philosophy, and American History would help them to ask better questions, to see and interpret the world differently, to communicate more effectively, to act in new

ways, to understand one another more deeply.

In doing so, I knew I was taking a risk. I knew that few if any jobs would ever require them to interrogate Homer's *Odyssey* or Shakespeare's sonnets; to analyze Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address or listen to FDR's fireside chats; to identify the powerful symbolism of the Parthenon or interpret the ambiguity of DaVinci's Mona Lisa, to explain Plato's "allegory of the cave" or define Kant's "categorical imperative." I knew that what we were offering here at Codman Square was—some might say—"impractical," given all the pressing troubles of our current world.

But I didn't care.

I didn't care because my life has shown me, time and time again, that despite their wild impracticality, the Humanities are essential to living well in this world. And by "well," I mean *justly*, not *selfishly*. After all, no self-respecting humanist has ever destroyed an economy, started a war, presided over a genocide, or denied a people their God-given rights. On the contrary, by definition, humanists value the human and aspire to be more humane. We seek not division and destruction but connection and the common good.

I stand by this belief with every bone and fiber of my existence,

and never more so than every June, when I stand here on this stage in this Great Hall to honor a newly minted cohort of truly enlightened humanists. If I have faith in anything it is the fundamental value of this kind of education.

But I have a confession to make tonight: my faith was shaken this year. It's no secret that we live in difficult times. Globally and locally, most of us are struggling—to pay our bills and to raise our kids; to stay healthy and remain happy. Our spirits are broken and our safety nets are torn, if they even exist at all. I know I'm not the only one in this room who has had a tough year.

In times like these, it's easy to lose faith. Truth be told, there were times I felt this would be the final year of the Boston Clemente Course in the Humanities—either because funding had been cut or because our collective commitment to this enterprise had waned. At the very least, I was sure this would be my final year. It didn't help that I was hopelessly overextended this year, juggling unprecedented professional commitments and unexpected personal difficulties. For me, the Clemente Course had always been an oasis; at times this year, it seemed more like a mirage.

At the risk of overdoing my metaphors, I lost the forest for the

trees this year. As Academic Director, I was focusing too much on *quantity*—lack of funding, student absences, the higher-than-normal dropout rate—and not nearly enough on *quality*: all of you.

And then, in March, I began to teach my part of the course. Very quickly, I was reminded of the things that brought me to this enterprise in the first place: my love of American history; the great challenge of trying to get my students to love American history; the tough questions you ask and the brilliant insights you offer; and the feeling—that feeling—I get every night, after class, when I drive from Codman Square back to Harvard Square, knowing that the bridge between the past and the present, so essential to providing a roadmap for the future, is stronger because of the time we have shared. If there is a word to describe this special feeling of inspiration and satisfaction and optimism, I'd like to know what it is.

And so, if I have learned one lesson this year it's the importance of *resilience*—of digging deeper when it seems like our resources and hope are exhausted. You all have resilience; you wouldn't be here if you didn't. And I guess I have it, too, because I'm still here and I'm not going anywhere.

There will be difficulties—of that I am certain—but as long as we

continue to be resilient, we will always be stronger than the forces that threaten to shake our faith, rock our world, and crush our spirit.

After all, it is this spirit of resilience that keeps us moving forward—the same spirit that guided fugitive slaves to freedom and new immigrants out of poverty.

It is this spirit that strengthened the resolve of the civil rights workers who went to jail rather than stand idly by.

The same spirit of resilience that lifted an improbable candidate to historic heights last November so that he might have the chance to lift this nation to greatness.

It is this spirit of resilience that helped defeat fascism in Europe and apartheid in South Africa; that led students to stand in front of tanks in Tiananmen Square twenty years ago and to march in the streets of Tehran this very evening.

It is this spirit that gives us faith that the best of times are still possible even when the worst of times seem unbearable.

And it is this spirit of resilience—of uncommon toughness in the face of great odds—that has delivered all of us here today.

I thank God for such resilience, because it's the best reminder we have that the human spirit can endure, that the human race will

endure, and that the Humanities must endure.

The great reformer Margaret Mead famously said: “Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it’s the only thing that ever has.”

We are those citizens: thoughtful, committed, and more ready than ever to change a world that desperately needs our humanity.

Congratulations, Clemente Class of 2009, and Godspeed.