

# SKIDMORE COMMENCEMENT REMARKS

May 16, 2015

**Mehmet Odekon**

Mr. President, members of the Board of Trustees, colleagues, guests (including families who traveled for this wonderful event from thousands of miles away— from Afghanistan, Swaziland, Greece, China, and 38 other countries), and my student friends, the class of 2015: I am honored to be elected the faculty speaker this year. I am inclined not to think of it as a punishment. It is a privilege to represent the Skidmore faculty; it is also quite a challenging task.

In a few hours, friends, you will be entering the post-Skidmore world, here in the United States or elsewhere. You will find a world that is more interconnected and interdependent today than four years ago. Technological advances, particularly in telecommunications, transportation, and production, have contributed to increasing economic, social, cultural, and political interdependence. We are truly living in the Age of Technology. We have, in the last four years, mapped the planet Mercury, mapped the brain, and invented blue-collar robots. But of course, you know all this: you are the online generation. Every aspect of your lives benefits from the Internet and information technology. But beware: the rapid changes in technology also render existing knowledge quickly obsolete. To keep up you need to continue learning. Learning, especially in the Age of Technology, is a necessary life-long activity.

You will be entering a world where cross-border flows of goods, services, and capital have reached an all-time record level. Within a click's reach you can find the cheapest resources that will minimize production costs and secure the highest return on investment. It's no surprise that the world you are entering is the richest and most affluent in history. The high financial wealth (\$153 trillion) and income (\$77 trillion) we enjoy today in the world are unprecedented.

In the midst of all this impressive affluence and progress, however, there are serious socio-economic problems awaiting you as well. We have rampant poverty and extreme inequality in income and wealth. These disparities potentially afflict societies with serious social ills. We have a serious problem with ecological sustainability. We are collectively contributing to climate change and to the destruction of the environment. Today, in the second decade of 21st century, we still witness bias and discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, and religion. These are problems common to every single country in the world. Only their magnitude differs from one to another country. Let me focus on poverty.

According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, in the United States—one of the largest and richest and most affluent economies in the world, where we earn more than 22 percent of total world's income—approximately 45 million Americans live in poverty. How can it be that the United States, relative to the rest of the Western industrial world, not only has the highest poverty rate but the highest child poverty, the highest number of working poor, and the highest inequality in income and wealth? And yet still, more surprisingly, the lowest ratio of social welfare spending to total national income?

Personally, I find this quite disturbing. How can the joy that riches and affluence provide coexist with such high poverty? I think the answer to this question takes us back to the 1980s, when a profound transformation took place in how people think and behave in our society. Again, this is not unique to the United States, but a global phenomenon; it is part of globalization.

Globalization helped create radical changes in the existing social contract, the unwritten code that defines what is and is not acceptable in a society. Our society began to accept poverty, accept inequality, accept

the commodification of all aspects of life, and accept environmental degradation in order to maximize self-interest.

It is time that we become more idealistic, more compassionate, more socially responsible, and more conscientious.

Friends, class of 2015, today is your graduation. A day of joy and celebration. Your family, friends, and Skidmore are proud of you. You are proud of yourselves and indeed you should be. You are leaving Skidmore accomplished in liberal arts education, a transformative education that has empowered and prepared you to take on the challenges and complexities of the world. An education that has made you aware of the importance of social responsibility and good citizenship. An education that has provided you with the necessary humanistic skills to succeed in your careers and as citizens. The strongest asset you have gained from Skidmore is your ability to think critically and creatively and to communicate your thoughts effectively. It is a skill unique to your excellent liberal arts education and essential for good citizenship. More importantly, in my view, it is essential for becoming a catalyst, an agent for social change, social change that will enhance your freedom as individuals.

Freedom, my friends, is never complete if we live in a society plagued with high poverty and inequality. Freedom is never complete in a society that judges people by the color of their skin or other physical attributes, or by their religious beliefs, or by their sexuality. Freedom is never complete if members of a society live constantly with the threat of natural disasters caused by climate change accelerated by human action. Freedom is not complete until each and every one of us is free from such ills.

My charge to you, class of 2015, wherever in the world you live and work, is: Let social and economic justice be your guiding principle. Use your liberal arts education to bring these social and economic ills to public attention and into public discourse. Don't be silent and indifferent. Be fearless; emphasize relentlessly that these problems are related to the excesses of the socio-economic system we live in, and that we share the responsibility to find solutions to them. Know also that to find solutions, you must stand up against the existing order and challenge its institutions and the powers behind them. It is a difficult task but you can do it. You are the future and you must make the future better than the present. Use your education and your courage to do what is right for humanity, for the good of society, and the survival of our species and our planet. We, Skidmore's faculty, provided you with the necessary tools. It is now up to you to use them, and use them wisely.

When I look at you, class of 2015, I cannot help but be impressed with your youthful energy, enthusiasm, excitement, and determination. I can tell you are looking forward to challenge. You are ready for it.

Good luck and thank you.