

Remarks from Terry Waite, noted humanitarian, hostage negotiator, and bestselling author

Keynote Speaker at 2012 Undergraduate Commencement Ceremony

Hosted by the Farquhar College of Arts and Sciences at Nova Southeastern University

May 12, 2012

“It is an honor and a privilege to be invited here today and to be the recipient of an Honorary Degree from your esteemed university. Thank you for your generosity and kindness. Today is a notable day for the many attending who will receive their degrees, and for their supporters. Years of hard work have now been formally recognized, and the unknown future beckons with all its hopes and uncertainties. Congratulations to you all.

I have but a short time this afternoon in which to deliver an address which, I trust, will contribute to this important day in your life.

One of the most powerful Commencement addresses I have read was delivered at Stanford University by the late Steve Jobs, who until just before his untimely death in October 2011, directed Apple Computing. It was powerful because this remarkable and unorthodox man spoke on that occasion out of his own personal experience. I cannot claim the same eloquence as Steve Jobs, but I shall follow him in also speaking from that which I have directly experienced and which has impacted on my life.

I have spent a lifetime working in troubled parts of this world and have witnessed firsthand the brutalities that human beings inflict one upon another. I have worked in war zones, confronted the evils of apartheid, and sought the freedom of innocent men and women who have found themselves detained against their will as hostages. I am glad to say that even though I am now into my seventh decade in life I have not lost the passion for truth, justice, and fair dealing in this distressed and divided world.

There is a price to pay for such involvements. In my case, whilst negotiating for the release of innocent hostages in Beirut, I was subject to political duplicity and found myself in captivity. For four and a half years, I was kept in strict solitary confinement. For the final months of almost five years incarceration, I was chained alongside other hostages.

To be in strict solitary can be profoundly disturbing and not infrequently leads those, who undergo such an experience, to fall into deep depression or mental disorder. I was kept in a room without natural light. Sometimes I was detained in an underground prison buried beneath an apartment block. Sometimes on the upper floors of a bombed-out building where metal shutters were placed over the window frames in order to keep the daylight out. I was chained by the hands and feet to the wall, slept on a mattress on the floor, and was allowed one visit to the bathroom a day.

For over three years, I received no books, papers, or radio and, apart from a cursory word with my guards, had no communication with another human being.

It was alarming, to say the least, to see my skin turn deathly white because of the lack of sunlight; to lose muscle tone because of the lack of exercise, and to see my beard, which was black, gradually turn white. I recollect thinking that I was growing old before my time. Of course we are all growing older, and most people manage to grow old with reasonable grace. Alas, in my circumstances, it seemed as though even this was denied me.

Given that I was so severely physically confined, I quickly recognized that I had to find a way of surviving. Throughout life, as I indicated at the start of this address, I had travelled widely. Now those travels had come to an abrupt halt, but I was not totally confined. I decided that even this dire situation provided me with new opportunities which might ensure my mental stability and extend the bounds of my captivity.

As a hostage, in common with many of the downtrodden of this world, one was subject to many indignities. In so called "normal" life, one's identity is constantly reinforced. We are recognized as student, graduate, father, son, professional.

Unconsciously, we receive positive affirmations that bolster our understanding of ourselves. As a hostage, one is subject to frequent degradation and belittlement, so any affirmation has to come from deep within. I decided that now I was presented with an opportunity to take an inner journey—to understand myself better, and in so doing, to affirm my own identity as a human being. I suppose this might be described as a form of self analysis. The danger of taking such a journey alone is that inevitably one will discover that deep within, one is, in company with all other human beings, a complex mixture of light and darkness. Good and evil, if you will.

The peril lies in being so swallowed by the darkness that one falls into deep depression. One way to prevent this is to come to the simple recognition that one is merely a human being in company with all other human beings, and we are all made in the same way. What one needs to seek is inner balance, inner harmony. I was fortunate in that, across life, I had been an avid reader. I had a respect for language.

Good language, like good music, has the capacity to breathe a certain harmony into the soul. I began to write in my head, and it was during those years that I wrote my first book in my head (I was not given pencil or paper) which, years later, I put down on paper when at Trinity Hall Cambridge.

I do not consider myself as an overtly religious individual, but I certainly have a faith and believe in a spiritual life. In captivity, one reduced faith to something essentially simple. In the face of my captors I could say:

"You have the power to break my body, and you have tried." I was tortured.

"You have the power to bend my mind, and you have tried." I was interrogated.

"But, my soul is not yours to possess."

Admittedly a simple formulation, but sufficient to enable me to maintain hope. If in situations of extremity one can maintain hope, then one is more than half way home.

I mentioned torture. May I read you a poem that I wrote sometime after the experience?

They came
At night.
Footsteps in the corridor,
A key turning
As fear grips my stomach.
I lie still on the floor, Blindfolded,
Sheltering beneath
My thin blanket,
Seeking protection,
Seeking what scrap of security I may find.
'Sit!'

The command echoes round the cell Like a shot from a pistol.
Chains tug at my limbs
As I struggle to obey.
My wrists and feet are seized As locks are removed. 'Stand.'
I stumble to my feet,
What is happening?
Why at this hour do they come? Can this be release?
Do I stand on the brink of freedom? My arms are gripped
As we move out of the cell
Into the unknown.
There are many in the room.
I hear laughter,
Words uttered in a half whisper, Words I cannot understand. 'Sit!'
I crouch and sit.

'Sleep.'
I lie on my back;
The room falls silent.
'What you say?'
Now I understand.
Another interrogation, Another bout of questioning, Another seeking for answers I cannot give.
'What you say?'
The voice is louder, Insistent.
'Nothing,' I reply, 'Nothing'. Something lands on my face, A pillow perhaps?
I struggle to breathe
As the pillow is held down. 'What you say?'
Someone holds my legs, Now my fear increases.
The room falls silent. Suddenly,

A searing pain
Convulses my body,
My feet are burning
As blow after blow is struck

With cable.
'What you say?'
'What you say?'
'What you say?'
I cry into the covering.
'O God. Let this pain cease,' What manner of person
Can so treat another human being To such indignity
And pain.
'Stand.'
I cannot.
Arms lift me to my feet
And drag me back into chains; Back into the night,
Back into a living death.

There was one thing that sustained me through this experience, and that was the fact that I could rely on truth. I could not possibly say that throughout the whole of my life I have always told the truth. There are times when I have been deceptive, for self protection or to make myself seem more important than I really am. However, in the extreme situation I have described to you, I could answer truthfully as I knew nothing in respect of the questions I was being asked. I then realized afresh what an important and vital support truth can be as we tread the winding pathway through life.

My time is over, and there is much more I could say. Let me conclude by saying this.

Do not neglect inner life. You move out into a world full of deception and duplicity, and at some point, they will touch and perhaps even taint you.

Retain your sense of self worth. Develop compassion for those who dislike you as well as for yourself. Respect truth.

Finally, we live in a world full of suffering, and suffering is no respecter of persons. It strikes where it will and is not fair, just as this world is not fair. Do remember that in most cases suffering need not destroy. Although without a doubt it is always hard to bear, often it can be turned to creative end.

Go well into the world, always remembering that you are the fortunate ones. You have an academic education. Now begins your education for life."