

I have been given ten minutes. Ten minutes to tell you that you are important and that you represent hope. Ten minutes to convince you that the world that you will be in charge of in a few years time will be the most complicated and riskiest in human history. History will remember your generation as either a generation of hope or a generation of disaster. It will be only your call.

Every new generation comes to the stage convinced about the stupidity of the mistakes or even crimes committed by the generation of their parents. Each young generation believes that they can and will do better. However, most of the time they end in the same mess like their parents before them.

But then there comes a generation that emerges in the moment of historical change and they witness and facilitate dramatic, often improvised steps and measures that change the world. This happened ten thousand years ago with the agricultural revolution and two hundred years ago with the industrial revolution. Your generation will deal with consequences of information or digital revolution, trying not to misuse AI, social media, and find the ways that will preserve democracy. This is the moment when a knot is made in history, where old answers cease to function and new ones are not yet available. In the past, similar situations have often led to chaos and wars. What can be done to avoid that? What can you do to avoid such a gruesome scenario? Will you be wiser?

Two and a half thousand years ago, a philosopher in Athens named Socrates stated that each of us has an inner voice, which he called daimonion, that tells us the difference between good and evil. And that it is only our choice whether we listen to it or not. The meaning of it – every one of us has a responsibility. And also – every one of us is important for the rest of the world and community. Another term for daimonion is conscience.

But - there is a great but. Our world today is interpreted in the framework of nation states – historically this is quite a new concept gaining prominence only in the late nineteenth century. Nation-states are now more than ever able to manipulate our minds, AI, social media, and other means. But nations do not have an inner voice; they cannot sense responsibility. If you forgive that expression – political nations are stupid, careless and easily manipulable. Responsibility, love, preservation of nature and preservation of moral values depend on every individual and communication among them.

You are graduating from one of the best schools in Central Europe – besides excellent curricula it is multilingual, multicultural, multi in every aspect of humanity. Such places are few and in moments of historical shifts, they serve as anchors and create a community of like-minded individuals. My foremost wish for you is to stay connected to your school. With time, you will increasingly understand how important its spirit and its community was, is and will be for all of you. This year, The Star was your symbol. Make it the Star for all alumni throughout your lives.

Living for more than seventy years provides a peculiar advantage. You remember a lot and you encounter numerous remarkable, funny or nasty people on the way. You can make comparisons. I have known or met several people who have lent their names to the student prizes at this school. My grandfather taught Czech language to the Čapek brothers during their primary school years in Upice. My first arrest by Communist secret police came after I stepped out of a red Ferrari sports car of Karel Schwarzenberg back in the 1980s. I was one of the first contacts of Roger Scruton in Prague when he came to give underground philosophy seminars to Czechoslovak dissidents. Věra Čáslavská was a dear friend to me. I had two wonderful private discussions with one of the Founding Patrons, who was Prince Charles at the time, in the early 1990s - now his royal majesty Charles III. All these experiences make me feel at home here. However, what I find truly extraordinary is that your school has named its prize for German language after the honourable Oswald Kittel, one of three million Sudeten Germans expelled from this country after World War II. For many years, I have studied this crisis – which was a genuine study in inhumanity. I feel a sense of responsibility, shame and welcome reconciliation. I have witnessed several war conflicts and encountered countless deceased individuals. A part of me, the naive part, perished with them.

We are all human. We will all eventually die. Trust this old man standing in front of you. Let your daimonion guide you in life, and it will be a life of dignity. Talk to your daimonion, because it will mean that you can talk to yourself, to your conscience. You will live without needing excuses. Trust this old man – it is a beautiful feeling when you are old and you can proudly declare that all your successes in your life were of your own doing, as well as all the failures. I have no excuses. Life is fun this way. Go for it, remembering where you started, remembering this school. This is just the beginning. A safe, loving and always understanding a safe place. The beginning of your journey. And from here - Follow the Star!

Jan Urban, May 2023