

Dean Harry Katz: ILR Graduation Speech 2008

As the Dean of the ILR School, I offer my sincere congratulations to our 2008 graduates. You have worked hard, accomplished much, and enriched your lives by exploring the opportunities provided by this marvelous university. And my congratulations also go to the family and friends who have nurtured and supported our 2008 graduates. These graduates could not have gotten here without you. We, the faculty and staff of the ILR School, thank you for providing us with such charming and challenging students to work with.

Graduates, you will be entering a labor market that is increasing global. Your work likely will take you to countries other than your home country or in other ways involve international issues. I want to talk about how ILR has prepared you for the challenges that the international nature of your work will bring and remind you of some of the key lessons provided by that ILR perspective.

The popular discussion about globalization, most forcefully presented in Thomas Friedman's book, argues that the U.S. economy and the economies of most advanced industrialized countries were largely closed prior to ten years ago when the internet and other technological changes brought a widespread transformation that essentially made the world flat. A flat world is one where goods and services and ideas, including technologies, rapidly move across borders and produce both a massive intensification of competition, potential down to the lowest common denominator, and a homogenization of culture and working lives.

At ILR you students have been exposed to a wide variety of courses focused on international issues and you have also taken advantage of various opportunities for an international experience through study abroad, international internships, course work at international partner universities, and course projects with an international focus. You have benefited from the fact that ILR faculty themselves have conducted international research and outreach and brought what they learned into the classroom; for some of those faculty, this required a reorientation in their research and scholarship. International student opportunities have also been made possible through the generosity of our alumni who provided both the financial resources and the network contacts to facilitate cross border connections.

Through that internationalized education and experiences you students have learned that the world is flat account while including some basic truths is also far too simple. For one thing you students learned that internationalization didn't suddenly start ten years ago. Rather, for much of the twentieth century the U.S. and other economies have been becoming more international. The rise of multi-national corporations accelerated after World War II, over 60 years ago. While the pace of change may well have accelerated in recent years, the direction of change has been clear for many years. At the same time, the world is flat view is certainly correct in arguing that the pace of globalization has accelerated in recent years, and the need to find ways to respond to and accommodate that acceleration poses key challenges. Maybe the best way to understand what is going on is to return to the insight provided by Bertolt Brecht when he wrote, "Because things are the way they are, they will not stay the way they are."

Irrespective of where one comes out on debates about how quickly and to what extent our country will face homogenizing globalization pressures, it is clear that the world is becoming more interconnected. What happens in the U.S. is clearly affected by what is happening in China and elsewhere, and we need to respond to that interconnectedness for many reasons. On the one hand, we need to know how events in other countries affect us for our own self interest. We need to know for example, how China and India's economic development is increasing demand for oil and other basic resources because that increase in demand has clear and strong effects on our economy. Just look at what has been happening to gas prices at the pump.

In addition, moral imperatives require that we be aware of and concerned about social and economic developments around the world. It is appropriate for us to pause at the start of this celebration to note the suffering occurring in other countries. And we need to do even more. One of the major economic developments of the day involves increasing polarization in incomes. The richer are getting richer while the share of those receiving solid middle incomes is declining in the U.S. and in many other advanced industrialized economies. In addition, the average income in wealthier countries is rising greatly relative to average incomes in the poorest countries. The fact that poorer countries are getting poorer is perhaps the most disturbing aspect of the widening income differentials. This is deeply troubling morally and it is hard to imagine that it is politically sustainable. You know from all that you have learned at ILR that it is no simple matter to

develop effective strategies that can address global poverty or implement those strategies. But the difficult nature of the problem is no excuse for inaction. I encourage you all to find ways to contribute to policy debates and actions that will address this issue.

An ILR perspective also teaches that another problem with the world is flat argument is that the world has not become nor is it likely to become truly flat in the near future. The world is not really becoming flat due to the persistent influence of many factors including significant cultural differences across countries and economic pressures favoring centralized rather than decentralized production systems, and economic pressures that put a premium on social and economic networks. Why does this matter? It matters because if the world isn't really flat, then social and economic systems are not likely to become homogenized and, as a result, at both the organizational and wider political levels, we will face choices regarding how to structure organizations and work lives.

An ILR perspective also teaches that there are significant cultural and behavioral differences across peoples within and across countries. In other words, we are not all the same. ILR has taught you to adopt a healthy respect for the significant diversity that exists across peoples and countries. I like the way my wife puts it when during our international travels she has reminded me that I should see unfamiliar international traits and phenomena as things that are different but not strange.

As the demands of work and family intensify you graduates will feel centrifugal pressures pulling you away from the friends now sitting next to you. Find ways to overcome those pressures whether by reconnecting through ILR and Cornell alumni events in the years ahead or through your own devices – keep in touch with your ILR and Cornell friendships. You will find that those friendships can provide added meaning to your life and become a key sustaining part of the community that deepens your life. Increasing globalization will make it especially difficult to maintain those close ties as your work sends you to distant locations. In the face of these pressures you graduates will also find that it will take more effort to stay in touch with your family. Graduates, in the midst of this celebration, take some time to think back about the ways your family helped you get here.

Also, reflect on how much the presence of your family enriches this event. You will find that the pressures of work, the demands of your immediate family life, and globalization will test your ability to stay connected to your family.

As the parents of a 2007 Cornell graduate, my wife and I have learned that those frequent cell phone calls we received from our daughter when she was walking between classes or from classes to her off-campus housing have been replaced over the last year by cell phone calls during our daughter's walks to and from the subway. But I wonder what will happen when our daughter and eventually our son's work takes them abroad. As those walks get replaced by the hustle and bustle of a truly international work life, will the calls diminish and what will replace them?

Be forewarned graduates, time will pass quickly. If you think your time at ILR went fast, wait until you step outside. You will need to assert yourself to slow things down, or else you will find that family and friendships will become only distant and missed memories.

So choose wisely as you make your way. And keep in mind the message well captured by Josh Billings when he said "Life consists not in holding good cards but in playing those you hold well." Graduates, look to your right and to your left. You will see fellow graduates who have come from an enormously diverse set of backgrounds. Some of you come from economically privileged backgrounds while others came here via much more modest upbringings. But it was not your inheritance that got you to Cornell, nor did your inheritance get you through Cornell, What did was hard work, the ultimate social leveler. Be proud of the work that got you here and helped you through difficult obstacles and challenges.

You graduates are a delightful and talented group and have greatly enriched the lives of the faculty and staff of ILR. You will honor us through your future accomplishments. There is nothing more rewarding to us than periodically reconnecting with you, so please stay in touch. Thank you.