

Alumni Commencement Address
University at Buffalo
Department of Romance Languages and Literatures
May 13, 2016 – Center for Tomorrow, University at Buffalo

Good morning UB! I'm sure many of you were wishing this ceremony had started later in the day. I can still remember a few Thursday nights in Buffalo.

First, Congratulations, you've learned more than just the subjunctive. Getting to today is a big achievement. First a quick moment of thanks.

Thank you to Dr. Scarlett for inviting me here today, the entire Romance Languages and Literatures department, and all of the friends and family, many of whom have traveled far to enjoy today with you all. I'd especially like to thank a few of my former teachers, Dr. Ludwig, Dr. Read, Dr. Irlam, and Dr. Welch, some of whom are here today. I'm more grateful than you know for all of your time, and guidance. Also a special thanks to my dad, step-mom, and fiancée who made the trip up today.

UB is truly a special place. I had opportunities here that I never dreamed of in high school. I traveled far and wide, I learned two new languages, I began to figure out my place in the world. Over the last decade, I've used not only the language skills I acquired at UB, but the life skills to do some pretty amazing things. Now as much as I'd love to stand up here and regale you with my greatness, I'd much rather try to distill a few small life lessons you can use to turn verb conjugation, poetry reading, and 18th Century literature into a skill set that will open doors for you in your careers.

So I have effs for you.

Focus on your goals

Harness your fears

Be Flexible.

The good news is most of you have probably done all of these things to make it here today. You understand the value of a second or third language. You understand what it means to think in a new framework, to adapt to a culture that isn't your own. Unless you're a native speaker you're harnessing all three of these abilities every time you open your mouth in another language.

Cada vez que abre la boca, chaque fois que vous ouvrez la bouche, ogni volta che apre la bocca.

Speaking a foreign language is scary, it requires linguistic flexibility, and demands your focus. And so it is with life, and with you careers. So let's talk for a minute about focus.

Focus

I still have my Petit-Robert, and my very large oxford Spanish and French dictionaries. There's really no good reason to keep them. They sit on my overcrowded book shelf, take up space, collect dust, and are easily replaced by an app. But they remind me of my freshman year in Roosevelt Hall, sitting at a bleak table outside

my dorm, double and triple checking words in stories and plays that were way above my head as a freshman. They remind me of the endless hours trying to play catch up with the kids who just came back from a semester abroad, and spoke with what seemed like flawless accents. They remind me of every time I told my friends I was too busy studying when they were off to do something fun. They remind me of my focus.

I didn't have to major in two languages. My mother – g-d rest her soul – wanted me to major in business, but I knew my passion. I knew what I wanted. Not because I thought I was good at languages, not because I thought learning French or Spanish was so important in life. But because I knew it would open doors down the road. I knew it would open possibilities on two if not three more continents. I knew my home wouldn't be in upstate New York, and maybe not even in any one particular place, and maybe some of you realize this too.

Focus is ultimately what got me a job in the Foreign Service, my only job goal since high school – which by the way, is not a great overall life strategy – but more on that later.

When I got to grad school, I really began to hone in on the Middle East as a region in which I wanted to study and eventually work. I had studied Hebrew as a child, and a bit at UB, and of course French. I had naively hoped this would qualify to start thinking about the region. I quickly realized however, that without Arabic it was all futile. So on the sideline of my two years of graduate school, I found private Arabic teachers, institutes, and tutors, and learned what little I could of the language. By the time I finished my masters, I was half-way through the process of becoming a foreign service officer, all but accepted. Unfortunately, my candidacy had an expiration date, and without passing a language exam in a critical needs language like Arabic, I was extremely unlikely to get the job. So having just received my MA, and only having one job prospect (remember, not a great plan), and student loan repayments about to kick in, I had a choice. I could find a real job, and hope – against hope - that the State Department gig would come through or go for broke and spend every last dime on Arabic lessons to pass a 30-minute phone exam that would all but guarantee me the job.

So I packed my bags for Egypt.

After two long flights, I found myself at a questionable institute on the outskirts of Cairo surrounded by Chechens, Indonesians, and Pakistanis – this was not the glitzy American University where my peers had studied, and I quickly realized it was less than ideal. When, I took my entrance exam, after two years, I thought I knew a bit of Arabic, but I was relegated to the beginner class and forced to relearn the alphabet along with all the other newbies. So I hunkered down, my goal in mind, and worked on my pronunciation of every single letter. It was embarrassing, but after being called out in my French grammar class for mispronouncing the letter “u” after 10 years of French, I could stomach a few Arabic tongue twisters and rote repetition of endless t,th,d, and dh sounds. But to be safe, I found a tutor who was willing to giving me more challenging work. I also spent my free time talking with hookah wallahs, tour guides and cab drivers. Whatever I could do to improve.

After two months of an Egyptian summer, I had sweated through all my clothes and it was time to return back to Washington DC for my phone exam.

But, when I came home to Washington, I immediately fell ill. With no hope of rescheduling my exam, I had to bear it with a 101-degree fever. Three months of intensive Arabic, almost no money and no job to speak of... so, no pressure. But as fate would have it, I quickly found out that my examiner used to live in Buffalo. No shit, I spend five minutes of my exam lamenting the trials of the Buffalo Bills in Arabic. My Arabic wasn't

flawless, heck, I was riding a Dayquil train, but I passed. It was the only time I was ever grateful that Rob Johnson was the Bills quarterback.

Four months later, I began my first day of training as a diplomat, and I haven't looked back, but boy have I been afraid.

Fear

Fear has been an integral part of not only my career but my experience with foreign languages as a whole. My entire life, I've been told I have "gift" for learning languages. The truth is that it's just something that I like, and I'm better than average at memorizing vocab. The truth is that every time I open my mouth to talk to a native speaker in any language, I'm scared. I'm scared I'm going to misconjugate a verb, or forget a preposition. I'm scared I'll mispronounce a word and accidentally insult someone's mother. And this fear is not misplaced. These things have happened more than I care to admit. In Arabic there is a saying that every word means three things – what it means, its opposite, and a type of camel. In Vietnamese I learn a new word every week that – when mispronounced – refers to some type of genital. In French, I can remember at least a few times when I accidentally asked about the preservatifs in the food, forgetting of course, that food does not contain condoms. So, language can be scary.

And it's not just about mispronouncing words, it's about being unfamiliar in a new context. At UB, I had opportunities to study abroad and use my languages in "the field," and also got to volunteer here in Buffalo at a local refugee shelter and a bilingual school. I held an internship during my study abroad in France, where I worked at an international NGO to help new immigrants and even helped translate documents from Spanish to French. My time at Vive la Case, the Herman Badillo academy, and Secours Populaire Francais allowed me to learn how to put my language skills to use in the real world. This was the preparation I needed to succeed in my job down the road. Every time I stepped into one of these jobs, I knew there were people counting on me to get things right, to listen, to understand and to help.

So to excel, you have to manage your fear. You have to accept that you are going to make mistakes and learn from them. You have to swallow your pride and keep going. There is no better lesson for life. And just as I started my career with State, I got an even heavier dose of managing my fears.

17 days into my first assignment with the Foreign Service, our embassy in Sana'a Yemen was attacked by six suicide bombers, and two car bombs. 19 people died that morning, including one of our guards, and a young girl from just down the road in Lackawanna. This was my introduction to the Foreign Service.

After the attack I had a choice to stay in Yemen or to take an optional evacuation. I was less than three weeks into my 'dream job' and I was petrified. In the end, though, my decision was simple. I just couldn't have looked myself in the mirror if I had left. I came out there to do my job, and for as long as they let me, I was going to keep doing it.

For two years, I drove 30 minutes each way to work thinking that I might never make it home. Think about that, for two years, I spent at least an hour a day, knowing there was a better than average chance that I might be kidnapped, shot, or blown up. And I kept doing it. One of my favorite quotes – one that kept me going – was from the original True Grit with John Wayne –

"Courage is being scared to death, but saddling up anyway."

That became a mantra for me and for better or worse I finished my tour. These are the places we need diplomats, the places that are difficult and meaningful for national security. I was proud to be part of that mission. And frankly, compared to my commute, speaking in Arabic with scores of visa applicants was a breeze, even if I accidentally may have accidentally called a few people's mothers camels.

So what did staying in Yemen get me? Well a few things. One, I stayed on the visa line and kept interviewing potential immigrants and visitors. I can tell you, I kept more than a few dangerous folks out of our country. I also helped more than a few families unite here in America. We helped rescue kidnapped children, issue birth certificates to Americans, and got some stranded and confused visitors safely home. I got to work refugee issues and helped some camps that were in desperate need of U.S. assistance. I also set up a volunteer program to help a local orphanage in Sana'a. Most of these are small things, but together I'm proud of the impact I made.

So my advice, is learn to harness your fear. It's ok to be scared, but if you are going to succeed, you can't let your fear control your decisions. Honestly, one of my biggest achievements recently was making a hair appointment entirely in Vietnamese. So, ask a stranger for directions, raise your hand in class, make a dinner reservation, do whatever you can in your foreign language. And don't be afraid to go to the difficult places in this world. You can accomplish great things.

Flexibility

Finally, the final – and maybe most important 'eff' I want to talk about is flexibility. For any of us who have studied a foreign language, this is absolutely paramount. I remember learning the word "circumlocution" from my 10th grade Spanish teacher.

Circumlocution is essential in any language in which you're not perfectly fluent. Simply put it means finding a way around a word you don't know. When you're first learning, this might mean saying 'I have to go get money' instead of 'going to the bank.' Later it might mean describing nuclear fission as the 'dangerous interaction between destructive materials in a bomb.' No matter the level you are at with a language, you need to circumlocute to survive. And although this is something you learn out of necessity in the classroom, it becomes something even more essential in the street or in a work environment.

For me, flexibility has always been difficult – just ask my fiancée. When I speak, I want to be precise. It's not enough to say that I ate a sandwich for lunch, I want to be able to describe the taste of the ingredients or at least ask for some hot sauce. But language, like life, doesn't always come out the way you want it to. I entered State thinking that I would become a Middle East specialist. After all, I had spent all that time learning Arabic to get the job. And I had survived a tough tour in Yemen. Even in my second assignment to the U.S. Mission to NATO in Brussels, I focused on NATO-Middle East relations. I assisted our ambassador through the military campaign in Libya, I established NATO's formal partnership with Iraq after the war, and I was a one-man monitoring team at the start of the conflict in Syria. But as fate would have it, my next job offer was to work on Malaysia – a country I had visited once, but had little familiarity with. Happy to be returning to the States after four years away, I accepted and hoped for the best.

What I finally learned first-hand, was that the conventional wisdom about my job, and I suppose any job, was true. The places you go, and job you hold matter significantly less than the people with whom you work. I was blessed to be in an amazing office with amazing people. So maybe U.S.-Malaysia relations had not been my area of expertise, but I did my job better because I worked with great people. Today we have a compre-

hensive partnership with Malaysia, and Malaysia has signed up to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a major free trade agreement. These things matter. As the only desk-officer working exclusively on our bilateral relationship, I know my efforts were paramount in these developments.

Even more important to my career, though, were the relationships I was able to build during my time working in our East Asian and Pacific Affairs bureau. Had I not been open to learning about a new region, committing to our policies, and being a team player, I would not have had anywhere near the amount of opportunities not only to contribute meaningfully to our foreign policy, but also to find a job which made me truly happy.

So again, after a few years when it came time to switch jobs, which is both a perk and challenge of the Foreign Service, I looked to those I had worked with along the way. They helped me find a truly enviable position in Vietnam as the Cultural Affairs Officer in Ho Chi Minh City. I never imagined serving in Southeast Asia, but one path leads to another as long as you are open to it. And honestly, I'm happier now doing work I never imagined doing, then I have been in my ten years of government service. Plus, I'm actually getting paid to learn a language! Sure, I never imagined I'd learn Vietnamese, but I'm more excited than ever to get started in Ho Chi Minh City this August.

So the final point is simple: learn to adapt, be flexible and you might just find success where you never expected it.

Conclusion

Language is a gift. It helps us understand how to build bridges with other people. It's something we should feel privileged to study. Because the relationships and opportunities you can create with language are truly unique.

You have the skill set. You have learned it here at UB. I know the faculty here, and I know the quality education. Whether you studied Italian poetry, French grammar, or Spanish literature, or anything in between, somewhere along the way you've learned to focus, to use your fear, and to be flexible. Your teachers have corrected your pronunciation – especially if you had Dr. Ludwig. They've given you insights and a path to understand different parts of the world and its peoples. Wherever you go, and whatever you do, remember them, and remember your school. Stay involved as alumni and give back when you can.

And just this final word of encouragement. Use your language skills to serve. Serve your communities by teaching, serve other communities through work with non-profits, or serve your country. The world needs people who can build bridges, who can relate to one another. And even though the distance between is shrinking everyday with advent of new technologies, there is yet to be a substitute for person-to-person communication.

You have a lot to be proud of today and this week. Congratulations: Felicitations, felicitaciones, complimenti dottore, Parabéns, Felicitări! Ма'abruk, Mazal Tov, Поздравляю, xin chúc mừng!

Thank you.

-David Turnbull