

## **Choices in a World of Strange People.**

[ Guest Speaker at the University of Ghana's Congregation -The College of Humanities, The Great Hall, July 20 2018.]

*Ivor Agyeman-Duah*

**I**t is in order that you are finally excited about this closure of campus engagement; together with your parents who have seen you through over the years. But the world in which they brought you years ago, is not the one you go into as young adults. For the matured ones among this graduating class, it is one you may not easily re-connect.

We are in a world of strangers as one Ghanaian philosopher – Kwame Anthony Appiah imputes in a title of his book. The reality of the situation however is that; the world has always been what we have known it to be. In the memorable words of V.S. Naipaul, “The World is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.”

I do not think that you have spent all your time here only to become nothing in the World. But we also know that goodness can come out of little. After all, you came here or many of you did so as strangers but now some of you have become the best of friends and there are, I presume, marriage prospects. It all comes down to choices we make even within the unknown. Naipaul’s conclusion came from the fact of growing up in a world like us- in Trinidad of the Caribbean. He wanted to be a writer from the very beginning and as soon as he graduated from university as you also do today. He became one: in fact, more than that to win the Booker Prize and later, the Nobel in Literature among others even if some readers have had to carry the cross of perceived arrogance.

It is estimated that in the next twenty years when you should be getting to the peak of your careers and developments, thirty percent of the global work availability would have been taken over by digital or artificial intelligence in which sense the world is not always what it is. The road to professional ambitions would have become narrower still. It will be in your generation and your future, to navigate with what you have been taught here. It should only be part of it since your success in community or national endeavors and fulfilments would be among many uncertainties.

What ethical values do you take to this world? How patient can you be to be trained before being a master unto yourself? You may have to sit at the feet of those who were once like you but have reached the heights of your aspirations.

More importantly, fixation of ambition, of self-ordination of particular courses of entertainment or engagements, when all the signs indicate a bad road, as against other known alternatives, is not how the world works.

I once served as a special advisor to the former President, John Agyekum Kufuor on international development cooperation. We had travelled to the Ivory Coast in October 2010 as he headed an international team of election observers including the Carter Center of former US President Jimmy Carter. We visited the contestants- Laurent Gbagbo a former history professor turned president as well as two Opposition leaders, Alassane Quattara and Henri Konan Bedie. We did so with a professor from Emory University and part of the Carter Center team. The options were opened to President Gbagbo should he, the Emory professor made known, felt like teaching at their university should he lose the election. He offered this though in a more diplomatic language than I am telling you.

After the ballots had been cast on October 31, it was clear that there had to be a re-run as none of the contestants won outright. We left for Geneva weeks after and it was whilst there that the international media started broadcasting on December 2 that Alassane Quattara who was also the former Deputy Managing Director of the IMF and one of the most respected African technocrats in the world multilateral systems, had won. That evening, whilst we were in Geneva and when the formal declaration was yet to be made in Abidjan, Quattara called President Kufuor and requested him to speak to Gbagbo and to assure him that he would treat him with respect deserving of a former President including security protocols.

Gbagbo listened to the advice but disputed the election results and later declared himself winner. With two declared presidents in one Republic, the forces or rebels mobilized from the North of the country and descended into Abidjan.

The South African airplane that decided, one report said, to evacuate Gbagbo from the country was the third and final option available to him. Yet he opted for one that was risky and ended at the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague.

We must remember President Gbagbo was once a history professor who had knowledge and probably taught many students about the rise and fall of leaders. That he was a victim was more to do with character which is an introvert thing and a quality of which you will need more than unfiltered knowledge.

Sometimes you need not think or contemplate alone. Even the Jews with the longest surviving civilization have a regretted history for doing this when they listened but alone. Over a century ago, an Australian writer, Mary Gaunt travelled to West Africa and would later publish her travel memoir- *Alone in West Africa* in 1911. I initially found the title intriguing. There were millions of people here at the time so how could she be lonely? But that was exactly her surprise too- a stranger, there was no show of a superior background to the people she met neither did she pretend to understand the environment better than those who lived in it. And so though alone, she was in company and sojourned happily giving us in the course of time, one of the classical works in West African economic anthropology.

These sorts of choices of humility in situations and dilemmas come in different forms and ways- international, national, local, family and in friendship but, the lessons are always the same into the known and unknown. And the answers could be within. We all hear these days of the economic growth and at one time of the fastest growth stories and development of Rwanda. President Kagame is not a trained economist and thus the circumstance of the country's post-genocide reconstruction was outside the conventional approach. But that formula of re-evaluation of the country's poverty profile, investment and redistribution of capital through availability of credit for cattle among the rural villages contributed significantly to poverty reduction and inequality. It was indigenous. I have seen similar indigenous growth strategies in agricultural development in rural areas of South Korea which started the 1960s rapid growth of the South East Asian economy. It has become a template of other countries search for development models.

Yet these models whether in Rwanda of poverty reduction programmes through microcredit like Ghana's Microfinance and Small Loans Centre or the South Korea's version like our district assembly common fund, have been with us for years. Why do these work elsewhere and not ours?

Your years of being here have not given you solutions to problems like these but the analytics to do so and you stand a better chance but not the right of way to do better.

As you peddle your canoes on the calm rivers into the future, we hope that the sun does not set on your travels. And that you do not let past failures and challenges trouble you on the way. And you will not need to look back on them, for if you do like Lot, you will turn into a pillar of salt.

May it be well with you, the Class of 2018.

And congratulations.