

Isabel Capelo Gil

Boston College Commencement Address

Your Eminence, Cardinal Séan O'Malley, Archbishop of Boston
Father Leahy, President of Boston College
Chairman of the Board of Trustees, Peter Marshall,
Board of Trustees,
Deans, Members of the Faculty,
Families of the 2019 Boston College Graduates,
Dear students and alumni

And the most important people in this Alumni Stadium, dear Boston College graduates, class of 2019, congratulations! As I look across this magnificent stadium and hear the energy of your youth, I feel the pride of your families, the sense of accomplishment of your Alma Mater and I rejoice with you over your tremendous achievements. Well done!

I am deeply honored to have the privilege to be the speaker of these 2019 Commencement exercises. It is no small honor, to receive an Honorary Doctorate from Boston College, a leading research institution, a transformational voice in global higher education, one that excels by the example of its Heightsonians. I would like to thank Fr. Leahy and the Board of Trustees for conferring upon me a distinction that is as undeserving as it was unexpected and say I pledge to honor the association with an inspirational institution leading in service to the Church and to society at large and truly embodying the spirit of an 'education with a heart and a soul'.

It is tremendous to speak to you, immensely talented BC graduates. This is both an incredible distinction and a thorny challenge, unimagined for the spirited child that I was growing up in Macao in the 1970's and 80's. It is truly humbling and perhaps even a bit outlandish to consider that as speaker to this class, my life's experience may be relevant to address the trials and opportunities of your future, your dreams and concerns. The Greeks named this presumed self-importance *hybris* – and saw it as a dangerous taunting of the Gods with an anticipated tragic outcome. Hopefully not so, today!

To speak to you, the embodied future, about what lies ahead is preposterous, in the sense that it is both outrageous – foresight is very likely to fail – and quite literally outmoded, because the speaker will seek to unravel the future with the inevitably outdated tools of the present. I could say the future has never been brighter, or I could say, the future has never have never been more worrisome, and array sound arguments for either. Your times are no more glorious or hazardous than those of your predecessors. What has changed is arguably not the nature but certainly the intensity, the scale of the challenges ahead, colossal in size and inevitably global in scope – amongst them the impact of climate change or the future of work - and the urgency to find robust solutions. This is a time to work together, not to build walls but for shared engagement in respect for our common humanity.

But perhaps more importantly, the story we tell about who we are, as human, social and political beings is also changing. And not always for the better. Stories make us human. They convey our dreams and aspirations, they communicate our view of the world and articulate ways of living together. And for this, we need to find the right language, responsible, civil and truthful.

In short, we are the stories we tell.

These stories are as poignant as the harrowing situations they address, as brilliantly playful as the happiness of simple life, as complex as human nature, as tremendously diverse as the people who voice them and yet they represent the shared values communities live by. They reflect the entanglements of human life, the aspirations and the shortcomings, the burdens of past history, the pride of scientific achievement, the disorderly brilliance of artistic creation. The stories we go by elevate us out of the abyss and substantiate the stories we tell about ourselves, our values, politics, culture and religion, defining how we position ourselves in the world.

For truly, humans are not the simple result of haphazard DNA coding. The dangerous mantra of perfection – perfect bodies, perfect lives, perfect technological advancement, spotless societies – results, and we know it sadly well, in authoritarianism, repression, abuse. What makes us human are extraordinary imperfections, and the will to improve upon them, in the management of our lives, in our understanding of

others, in the respect for the environment and in our contribution to society. The stories we go by enable a sense of purpose and instill meaning in our quirky singularities, helping us understand how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. They are certainly not immune to criticism and doubt, radical even at times. For the stories are never fully told, they live on in our practice and it is up to us to improve, transform and revise them. In fact, to live full lives, we will never be done with questioning, with undoing and redoing. Transformation is not a target, but a process, and one that you'll never be done with.

You have been partners in BC's exceptional model of instruction and a lot is expected of you now. Remember that "Every one to whom much is given, of *her* will much be required." (Luke 12:47-49) Be generous in your giving, and be wise in the choices you make, they are the turning points of life's exciting page-turner.

Chance and choice modeled by the shared structures of feeling and translated into the stories you live by will give shape to your story and sustain or revise your beliefs. No one stands alone in the world of super connections and your story shall be affected, impacted, by those of the people around you. Others will confront you with the most challenging dimension of human growth: the experience of difference. And this comes in all shapes and forms, in the uttering of different views and in anthropological diversity. Engaging with those, who

challenge your right to hold the opinions you hold, your faith and beliefs, your values, is perhaps the most difficult path to follow.

As a Portuguese woman, living in a country overlooking the wide Atlantic, building bridges has been almost instinctive. History and geography have also shaped me. An immense curiosity for what lays beyond has shaped my journey and my story. I grew up in Macao, a place in South East China, in a house overlooking the Pearl River, back then the natural border between this territory overseen by Portugal and China, and across from the oldest Buddhist temple in the city, dating back to the 15th century, and dedicated to the goddess Mazu, locally named A-Ma. Further up the hill, a neat 6' minute walk from the temple, was St. Lawrence's, our parish church. After school, my friends and I used to climb up the mossy rocks of the temple and observe with curiosity the worshippers and – for our Western gaze - their quaint practices. The monks were accustomed to our intrusions and let us be, as they went about their daily routines, gesturing for us to stand where we would not disturb the rituals, but could respectfully observe the ceremonies. Or even at times inviting us to share a meal, which we initially rejected with outright suspicion and then curiously accepted. We, the five urchins of Ma-Kok-Miu, as the neighborhood was called, cultivated this relationship eagerly and in hindsight it probably influenced many of the choices I was to make in life.

Growing up in a multicultural and multilingual setting, I developed an understanding of the world not as a club for those who think alike and enjoy the same tastes, but a public *agora*, or assembly, that space where the Greeks interacted with their neighbors, a space where everyone regardless of culture, social status and religion could have a voice. In the 1970's, Macau was certainly one of the most cosmopolitan spaces in the world, where Portuguese culture and Catholicism – and a very strong Jesuit legacy – co-existed respectfully with Chinese traditions and Buddhist spirituality. But this was also a time of upheaval in South East Asia, of the Vietnam War, the surge in migration and the arrival of the so-called 'Boat people', the invasion of East Timor. China was also changing rapidly.

Cultural contact, or as Pope Francis puts it, the culture of encounter is the true cultural position. And when two different cultures come together suspicion, violence and antagonism are much easier than dialogue. It takes courage to address that which is alien, unlike, to engage with those who deny one's existence. That is in fact the difficulty of the cultural encounter, and of Christianity, as such. But if we are to honor the Christian values we go by, there is no other choice. Christianity demands that we take that step, calling for a willingness to listen to the Other, in the name and the spirit of our common humanity. Because the world does not stop at the nation's borders. In our global world, responsible leadership comes with an ability to listen, not simply babble, shout, bully and tweet away.

My story was inevitably shaped by an insatiable curiosity for cultural diversity, understanding that my culture and my position were but a small event in the luxurious performance of world cultures. The study of literature came naturally, then. The stories and the dramas are a gateway to the human soul, to politics and economics, to destruction, perversity, transcendence and creativity. The wide world of literature comprehends the whole world. In times of duress, the memory of poems once loved, as the exiled Hannah Arendt recalled, upheld the possibility of survival and the dream of return. I learnt that the journey and the books create us, that fiction substantiates a sense of aspirational possibility which became personal resilience, it intensified ethical awareness and a keen conviction that change can happen, but not without one's willingness to serve and act.

Inspired by BC's living values and global educational model, a new journey begins now, a new twist in a flourishing story. You have been given the tools to become great characters in a transformational plot, the kind of which will lead our runaway world into new directions, inspired by solidarity and not isolationism, respectful of our stunningly fragile globe and keenly aware that this is perhaps the last chance to get the story right. It will not be easy, things are complicated, but this is precisely their beauty. To be ethical leaders in this stunningly diverse world takes courage. First, the courage to listen; secondly the unwavering defense of the right of others

to be heard, even if in disagreement with your innermost beliefs and to always speak up against abuse.

Because we seem to have forgotten the most beautiful story of all, that acknowledges flaws and failure but speaks of improvement and potentiality, of the pursuit of a more perfect society, infused by freedom – of speech, assembly, religion –, respect – for democratic rule, respect for human dignity, respect for the planet, ultimately – and we should never be done with repeating it: acknowledging the universality of basic human rights, the right to life, liberty and as the American constitution so beautifully puts it, to the pursuit of happiness. We are the stories we tell.

Be advised that in the great story the share of duties and responsibilities is to be equally weighed, irrespective of gender and ethnicity. Many years ago, as a sophomore, reading English Literature in Lisbon, I was particularly enthused by an anecdote told by Virginia Woolf in the seminal *A Room of One's Own*. There she tells how upon having been invited to speak at a prestigious British university, she was intercepted by the Beadle, the official usher of the college, while walking across the lawn. He told her with stern voice to step off the turf, where only the male Fellows could walk, and take the gravel path instead. The confrontation drew a clear line between the spaces of the Beadle and the woman, between herself and the (all male) scholars and fellows. The turf – which, as she ironically wrote, had been ‘rolled for 300 years in succession’ – could not be touched by the woman’s gentle feet.

Well, it became immediately clear, that it was going to be my life's work to walk across that turf. And as well to strive so that other women could have that same choice.

Despite the many advances over the last decades, women make up only 5% of world leaders – heads of state and heads of government. Barely 33 of the Fortune 500 companies have women CEO's and only 12% of universities in Europe and North America are led by female presidents. Well, it is high time for a radical plot twist, that stems from a correct reading of the needs of society and the potentialities at hand. It is basically a display of fairness and good sense. Women are great change makers and in these interesting times there is an unquestionable need for humane, competent and caring leaders. Women take care, but they are also ready to take charge and take on the duties and the responsibilities that are now entrusted to the other 50% of the world population. Women are brave, and selfless, like Sister Maura Lynch, a doctor and a member of the Medical Missionaries of Mary with an extraordinary life dedicated to women's health in Angola and Nigeria. More than playing with words, women act. In the Gospel, the women that follow Jesus never doubt His word. They express themselves through gestures, such as the woman that wet Jesus' feet with her tears and wept them with her hair. They act with the strength of their conviction and display an incredible ability to serve. Women are daring like Saudi activists Loujain Al-Hathloul and Iman Al-Nafjan, jailed

without due process for the cheeky demand for driving rights. They are resilient, like Malala Yousafzai, they are champions of the underdog like Anjezë Gonxhe Bojaxhiu, aka. Mother Theresa. Women are thought leaders, innovators, extraordinary trailblazers and superlative professionals in business, academia, politics. Profess these stories as your own and do not let talent go to waste. Women of Boston College, I invite you to walk across the lawn.

Remember, we are the stories we tell.

Class of 2019, after the preamble of the educational years, the action chapters now begin. Take charge of your narrative and build coalitions, as Pope Francis invites us to do, armed with the spirit of a culture of encounter to build a more respectful and inclusive society. We live in a world that is as diverse as it is beautiful and fragile. Take risks and dare to become role models for those who come after. Listen to the sounds and the voices around you. Often, the challenge of borders is a challenge of ignorance. If you want change, speak up. If injustice looms, defend your rights. Act wisely in the face of fear and never surrender your compassion for those who cannot aspire to a life well lived under the rule of law and in respect for human dignity.

And finally, I bid you, in the immortal words of one famous member of the BC community, “Live long, and prosper.”

Thank you.