

VICTOR YUSHCHENKO

SOUTHERN UTAH UNIVERSITY COMMENCEMENT SPEECH

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Victor Yushchenko, former president of the Ukraine and translator Maryna Antonova.

President Wyatt, esteemed Board of Trustees, dear graduates, teachers, parents and guests – congratulations and greetings to you all!

Thank you for the privilege of receiving an Honorary Doctorate from your illustrious university. Thank you for your hospitality and kindness.

I was deeply impressed by the beauty of the state of Utah when I visited a number of years ago. I have always

sensed a deep connection between the people of Utah and the people of Ukraine, and indeed, so many of your citizens have served and given their time and commitment to our country, for which we are truly grateful.

Our country, Ukraine, has fought for centuries for its independence, its freedom, its right to self-determination, its right to worship God, for its culture and its language.

Millions of Ukrainians have perished during the past three centuries in wars, famines, gulags and exile. In the 20th century alone, we lost 40 million to war, artificial famine and repression. 40 million! During the 20th century, our nation proclaimed its independence six times, but lost it five times. Only in 1991 were we able to realize the dreams of our forefathers, and finally become an independent state.

This was the weight of history put on our shoulders.

For centuries Ukrainians could only dream of freedom, and even today, we are fighting a war to maintain this hard-fought independence.

What I want to talk about today is how one needs to respond to the challenges that God places before us, what we need to do when God calls us to leave our familiar path and discover new horizons. When we receive a chance to MAKE history, not just observe it.

You may look at me with scepticism – but I assure you, you must prepare yourself to MAKE history, to change the world in which you live for the better, to be able to respond valiantly and wisely to the huge burdens that may be placed upon you, your families and your country in the future.

I know, dear graduates, that today amazing emotions and thoughts are lifting you up, giving you wings. Through diligence and hard work, many hours of study, you have earned a profession that will lead you to achieve your dreams and attain great heights. A profession that will give you the keys to many opportunities to serve your country and to honor your family.

But just as importantly, along with your diploma, you are now a full-fledged citizen of your country. A citizen responsible for everything that happens around you, for the direction your country takes in the future, for its prosperity and security.

Your fate is in your hands. In every society there are millions of people who were never able to realize their destiny. They made too many mistakes, too many poor choices, did not take quite enough responsible actions.

Indeed, your destiny is always the sum of your decisions and deeds. It is your choice and your responsibility. And the dreams that you dream may indeed be realized -- it is up to you and you alone.

I was born in a village in eastern Ukraine. Our village did not have electricity or roads, it was rural and isolated. Can you imagine, we didn't even have television!

One third of our inhabitants perished in the artificial famine, called Holodomor, organized by Stalin in 1932-33. Another fifth of our inhabitants were killed in the Second World War.

My father survived Aushchwitz and many other Nazi concentration camps. He was freed from captivity by the American army, where he even served for a number of months,

helping Americans hunt former Nazi SS commanders. When tens of thousands of other Ukrainian soldiers died in these camps, he survived. When asked how, he always said – “because I had not yet had a son.” He returned to his native village, married my mother, became a teacher, and had two sons.

My story, just like yours, began with getting an education. After receiving a degree in finance and accounting, I began my professional career.

For many years, I worked as Governor of our Central Bank, where I was able to implement a major monetary reform that introduced Ukraine’s new currency. Can you imagine the privilege and pleasure it was to design and sign the new money of our new nation? I was honored that this monetary reform was considered to be one of the most successful in post-war Europe.

Eventually, I was asked to be our country’s Prime Minister at a time when Ukraine began paving its way to a market economy, prosperity and economic growth. Soon, however, I needed to lead the opposition to those forces in our country who wanted to move Ukraine backward, toward Russia and away from Europe and democracy.

I was elected President of Ukraine at a time when the very fate of our nation was being decided – whether Ukraine would become a truly independent, free and prosperous European country, with free speech and fair elections, or whether it would return to a state of medieval slavery under Russian domination. And now, a decade later, I continue to work to help my country achieve its historical mission, especially in this time of war and turmoil.

Just as I, an economist and banker, responded to the needs of my country, I believe that it is very important for you to have a broader perspective of the world than is required by the narrow confines of your career choice, and that you also be ready to respond when your nation calls.

And I have one more piece of advice to you: always be professional in everything you do, always be responsible and rise to each and every challenge that life places in your path.

Very few people are born to greatness, to becoming revolutionaries or leaders. But no matter how humble your background, be ready when God calls upon you to serve your country --

Like my father, who survived Aushchwitz and other German death camps;

Like I did, when Ukraine became independent and demanded first that I become its chief banker and then, that I become its chief revolutionary, facing threats poisoning and assassination attempts;

Like the people of Ukraine did when the Orange Revolution started, and when they came to the streets for the Revolution of Dignity 10 years later;

The fight for independence never stops – thousands of Ukrainian soldiers are volunteering and dying every day, sacrificing their lives for Ukraine.

Thousands of Ukrainians are volunteering to support our soldiers, to fight corruption and to build a civic society.

God will show you the moment of your life when your sacrifice may be necessary for values more important to you than life itself.

One of my mentors used to tell me, “Victor, the true hunter is not the one who sees the pheasant on the hill. A true hunter sees the pheasant beyond the hill.”

So look more often over the horizon, you will find a fascinating world there, a world worthy of your life. That is what I wanted to say to you in this last sentence of my talk.

But I also want to emphasize one more thing – be grateful to your parents, always and for everything, and prove it in how you live your life. You are their greatest legacy.

So, address your applause to them. Thank you.