

# **AGS Commencement Speech**



on political power. The great dissident physicist Fang Lizhi used to ask his adoring students at the time of Tiananmen if they believed in physics with Chinese characteristics. He wrote that the principles of human rights are like the principles of science – universal.

But they are always at risk.

Do you ever wonder what it must be like without democracy?.....To be afraid of going to jail for saying the wrong thing, or in Iran, for wearing the wrong thing, or not wearing it.

Anna Akhmatova tried to describe it on behalf of the victims, the millions of silent people just trying to survive. In Leningrad in the darkest night of Stalin's terror she would visit the prison where her son and her husband were locked up because she was too well-known to be taken herself.

The only way of knowing if your loved one was still alive and still there was to bring a package. If they called your name and accepted it, the news was good. Women huddled outside the walls in the dark winter cold.

Names were called. Then, "Akhmatova."

Faces turned toward the writer. A voice whispered, "Can you describe this?"

“I can,” she promised. And did. But still we find it hard to grasp the world of fear.

The struggle for rights and against fear is a human story. It has martyrs and heroes.

Anna Politkovskaya. Russian journalist. Relentless in exposing atrocities in Chechnya and crooked



In Chapter One there is the build-up over time of resentment over the grievous costs of being not free. Their humiliating effect.

A “shared awareness” emerges.

To know what was going on, Tunisians didn't need to depend on Wiki leaks and the US Ambassador's description of the obscene excess of the dictator's son-in-law's seaside house, with its caged tiger, and ice cream desserts flown in from St Tropez. Or that the dictator's immediate family controlled 50% of the country's economy.

These were open secrets. But when fruit vendor Mohammed Bouazizi set himself on fire because of injustice, it became the tipping point. People rose up. Open secrets became public truths.

When protests become uprisings in Chapter One, the self-discipline of nonviolence is essential.

Gandhi is sometimes mistakenly portrayed as a pacifist. He wasn't. But he knew that if protest turns

protestors. As they have in other critical places. Moscow, and Kiev.

In others, Tiananmen, Rangoon, and Tehran security forces followed deadly orders to shoot to kill. The peaceful uprisings were put down. For only for a while.

In Syria, the regime thinks it can do the same. Militias have murdered innocent children. But sooner or later, this regime will fall. Dictators inevitably go down, or out.

Once they do, Chapter Two begins, the transition to democracy. It's often more difficult than Chapter One.

I learned in Russia in the 90s that democracy is behavioural. It has to be learned. It takes time.

It's not a process - an "app" that can be downloaded. It's about more than elections. It's about what happens after the elections. Especially about managing pluralism. Tribes, religions, sects, regions, winners and losers.

People need our help to build the capacity to do that. Not to tell them how we do things (because we often don't do them so well ourselves) but to support their own learning process and to help them deliver transparent and effective government, including first and foremost safety and law and order, and human

and minority rights rooted in law. And education that's actually useful.

The Arab Spring has been over much more than absence of democracy.

It is a protest against a system's failed promises.

Privileged interests call the shots and get the rewards. It is inherently unfair, especially to the young. If they got education, there were no jobs.

Sound a bit familiar?

As the Arab Spring spreads, I hear that maybe it's a mistake to support such uprisings, which seem to bring instability to a volatile and critical place – the Middle East.

It is a critical place, especially to the people who live there.

60% of them are under 30. Arab youth are no longer humiliated by being outside the conversation. The student movement in Yemen is called “



They know how we live here. They expect us to live up to what we say are our values. To be consistent.

The Middle East is inherently unstable because it is unjust.

We were \_\_\_\_\_ by dictators who claimed to be our allies in a wider war against “terror.” It led to false choices – such as dictators or islamists. The delusion

The principles of tolerance and inclusivity are issues you can bring into whatever profession you are following.

warning signs from inside diplomatic or corporate bubbles.

Let me suggest some guidelines for behavior.

I worked for several years at the UN. It

That was a great line, and everybody laughed, because it had some truth obviously, as the Soviet delegate was the first to know.

Truth has power. But be moderate in speaking what you believe from your standpoint to be the truth about other peoples' realities.

The best thing a diplomat can do is listen. To make "talk shops" a listening shop.

Listening to the priorities of others, which may not be yours.

A remarkable Algerian diplomat, Brahimi, was tasked a few years ago by the worried Security Council to try

He achieved this by listening, not by talking.

