Commencement 2011
Student Speaker Finalist

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MA in Labor Studies

Members of the CUNY Board of Governors, CUNY trustees and Administrators, distinguished members of the faculty and staff of the City University of New York, platform participants, my fellow graduates, family members, friends, and other acquaintances of the proud graduates, ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to the 2011 Commencement for the Graduate School and University Center’s School of Professional Studies. On behalf of the graduates and most significantly, on behalf of the first and pioneering group of graduates of the M.A. program in Labor Studies, of which I am a proud member, welcome again to commencement. I want to formally express my gratitude and sincere thanks to the City University for the honor and privilege through their invitation, to offer the commencement address today on behalf of my fellow graduates.

During his re-election campaign, Former President George Herbert Walker Bush, the 41st President of the United States, was asked by a reporter to offer his vision for the country. The President responded by saying that he sees his life in terms of missions. For those of us who may have preferred an exegetical political discourse in response to that question, let us excuse the President’s response for its lack of political and intellectual depth. Let us recognize that as a military man, a combat Pilot, to boot, his life and job were always presented and defined in terms of missions. Military organizations function in terms of missions. Missions represent the essence of the military’s functions.

For us as human beings, as individuals and particularly as graduates, the existential questions regarding our purpose in life, indeed our mission in life, must never be abdicated or relegated to the philosophers, the religionists, the moralists, the therapists, or even to the religious and spiritual leaders, their piety notwithstanding. For us as graduates, (and others), our mission must always be re-invention. We must always be ready, willing and equipped, to re-invent ourselves. Indeed, I hereby submit to one and all here today, that, (1), like the military, the essence of our lives must be re-invention (2), the nature of the modern world requires it as we are now dominated and driven by the needs of the neo-liberal economic paradigm, (otherwise known as free-market capitalism, and what Karl Marx otherwise refers to as dialectic materialism) and (3), the CUNY School of Professional Studies, its existence and its proud products, us graduates, are model examples and products of institutional re-invention.

A few years ago, in one of its strategic planning documents, the Pentagon noted that, with the changed threat conditions facing the United States, the military must, by necessity, transform and re-invent itself from a heavily armored fighting machine to one that is faster, more mobile, nimble and versatile, yet just
as lethal. We have seen the former centrally planned communistic economy of the Chinese State, by necessity, reinvent itself as a bastion of capitalistic globalization; we have seen dictators, faced with the resolve of their people marching with the flag of democracy under the aegis of freedom, suddenly re-invent themselves as attentive benevolent leaders offering political reforms; even Raul Castro, the brother and successor to Fidel Castro, has re-invented himself; the Associated Press has recently reported that Raul Castro, the brother and successor to Fidel Castro has implemented term-limits for the un-elected senior leadership of the Cuban government, including for himself; we have seen a President Bill Clinton transform and re-invent himself as a conservative centrist, also by necessity, adjusting to the then prevailing political realities and ensuring his re-election; in today’s presidential political dynamics, we have seen leading political and business figures re-invent themselves in the interest of achieving their political and other objectives; we have also seen where major corporations (and AIG as well as Wachovia/Wells Fargo readily comes to mind) re-invent themselves as part of a business plan; in Hollywood as well as in the entertainment and media industries, we have seen actors and others, through longevity, re-invent their roles from yester-year’s sex-objects to today’s mature parents, and, interestingly enough, as a result of significant specialized medical advances, sometimes we have even seen today’s older adults re-invent themselves as younger sex-objects.

Re-invention in all these situations, ladies and gentlemen, was, and continues to be a necessity for survival. Re-invention means finding new and creative ways to do business, to appeal to the masses, being innovative, finding new and innovative ways to deliver services, to market or re-position a product, and being wise and creative to meet the new and changing needs of society. Re-invention is an indispensable tool for all of us. How many of us have at least two or three versions of our resume, as is highly recommended by our Career Services department? This, ladies and gentlemen, is another example of re-invention, a personal re-invention.

My fellow graduates, our mission should be to re-invent ourselves to meet the changing and challenging needs of our society and our world. Re-invention is necessary and indispensable as we face a constantly changing world, at the global, national and local levels. From local and national demographics to the global political economy, change, as they say, “is in the air.” Ladies and gentlemen, the current neo-liberal economic paradigm and its political cohorts has saddled us with a federal debt equal to almost 50% of GDP, a financial sector debt equal to about 117% of GDP and household debt equal to almost 100% of GDP, according to John Cassidy; and this was before the great recession of 2008 from which we have yet to recover, having left us with an unemployment rate of at least 10%. This economic paradigm has also provided us with 18 bank-related crises in the developed countries since WW II, according to Carmen Reinhart & Kenneth Rogoff. Other economic practices, including “the race to the bottom”, have decimated our industrial/manufacturing base and now threaten our
established technological leadership. We sometimes see the prevailing political discourse and rhetoric attack the weakest among us, try to take away well-established rights, and seek to strengthen the strong at the expense of the weak.

With changing and dynamic local demographics and increasing customers, CUNY, like other institutions in society has again re-invented itself and in 2012 will open its first college in about 40 years, the new CUNY Community College. Like its re-invention with the creation of the School of Professional Studies, CUNY’s aim is to strengthen and address the unmet educational and intellectual needs of a changing New York. This new college will focus on new, innovative and creative ways to deliver instruction, support students and prepare its diverse students to meet the changing needs of our great city. I commend CUNY for its ability to adapt and re-invent itself to the changing needs of its customer base.

My fellow graduates, as proud products of CUNY’s re-inventing itself through the School of Professional Studies, we, more than anyone-else need to re-invent ourselves to meet the challenges of our world and our society. This will require awareness, drive, intellectual flexibility, adaptability, dedication, fortitude, and yes, a high degree of tolerance and patience. The good news is that the same attributes and qualities that were necessary for the successful completion of our respective academic programs will also be necessary for success in our re-invention efforts.

As the nation celebrates the 150th year of the start of the Civil War, what I would describe as “the mother of all re-inventions,” let us collectively draw on our known strengths, the strength of our people, our optimism and positive outlook as we face the future and our re-invention. The nation has re-invented itself (not yet that “more perfect union,” but we are working on it) from a bastion of division and oppression through slavery to a fiery, egalitarian, bi-polar if imperfect, political democracy.

My fellow graduates, ladies and gentlemen, as I close, I want to point out that, only a few weeks ago, an array of beautiful kites covered the sky in Pakistan for “Vasanta”. Fly west and land in Iran and you would have found Persians in the streets enjoying the festivals of “Now-ruz”. Travel East across the globe and you would have found Indians cheering and painting with vibrant colors to celebrate “Holi” and with a quick trip to our nation’s capital, Washington, DC you would have found the National Mall sprinkled with cherry blossom buds. Why? It is Spring. The season of Spring is like none other.

Unlike the other three cyclical periods of the calendar year, this one brings about newness. The harsh and cold of winter melts away and springs forth-radiant flowers, warm sun, fresh fruits and new life.
Fellow graduates, as we go forward, let us, like Spring, jettison the cold nihilism of Nietzsche and the pessimism of Schopenhauer. Rather, like Spring, let us look forward to new beginnings, new life and new opportunities. Ladies and gentlemen, my fellow graduates, let us Spring into life, let us achieve the possible mission of re-inventing ourselves for the challenges of the future.

Thank you very much.