Jeremy Varon • Eugene Lang College Graduation Speech • May 17, 2012

Like most parents, my late mother had a quiver of little sayings she'd pull from to edify and amuse me. Among my favorites, uttered as she first dropped me off at college, was, "Be good, and if you can't be good, have fun." I of course saw enormous freedom in this injunction, which became my perilous creed, in college and beyond. As I've grown, I've learned that having fun *while* being good yields more durable pleasures. I've come to regard my German mother's uncharacteristically libertine hope for me as her way of wishing me happiness in life. Amen, and I wish you the same.

Another saying of hers — born of the identical wish — was: "May you live in interesting times." This slogan first frames my address today, and very much reflects my standing as a history professor at The New School. My comments are a meditation on my time and yours, how we inhabit history, respond to our moment, and ourselves make history. It is a message of hope, in which Occupy Wall Street and the affinity of The New School with it, hold a special place, but one that emerges through the bramble of crisis and even despair. It reflects less what I have tried to teach my students than what I have learned about them and, most importantly, from them. In that sense, I intend my remarks as a tribute to the distinctive quality of Lang College as a kind of mutual intellectual aid society, in which we are all both teachers and students, no matter our formal roles.

"May you live in interesting times." This slogan stung, striking at the heart of my sense of having been born too late. Born in 1967, I caught the tail end the 1960s in all their world-shaking majesty, like the trail of a brilliant comet. Too young to have experienced that brilliance myself, I was just old enough to know I mostly missed something big. It is therefore no accident that I have devoted much of my professional life to understanding the 1960s as a time when nothing seemed sacred or settled, and the world was big with possibility, driven by the utopian passion of youth. Inspired as well by the 60s-era slogan that it is better also to make — and not just study — history, I have lived my activist life in near-imitation of my forbears who sought big change.

But alas, my own times never seemed resonant with my somewhat vain hope for them. I

threw myself, while a college student, into the great struggles of the Reagan era, whether opposing budget cuts to human welfare or US intervention in Latin America. But these often had the quality of rear-guard actions to protect American social democracy from deeper attack or simply to prevent "another Vietnam."

With great irony, the most momentous political event of my life — the end of the Cold War — registered with a whimper, not a bang. As many in the United States worried how we'd cope with peace and prosperity, Francis Fukayama famously declared "the End of History." The great ideological rivalries, he asserted, had been definitively settled on the side of liberal, democratic capitalism. Aside from residual conflicts at the globe's margins, what we mostly had to fear, he cautioned, was . . . boredom. As if to spice up the lethargy of structural consensus, a president was soon impeached for the monstrous offense of a sexual peccadillo.

With the East-West conflict gone, that between South and North, the global rich and poor, flared anew. Fueled by the faith that "another world is possible," the global justice movement of the late 1990s, for an incandescent moment, kindled the hope that grand hope itself had not been extinguished. The times, in short, had started to grow interesting again, as a new set of barricades began to call.

Reality then took a wicked turn, placing the last of my mother's maxims on its head and summoning another one that links my time and yours: "Be careful what you wish for." The slogan, which I had hitherto regarded as mere cliché, now seemed like fair warning. 9-11, by common hindsight, was two tragedies in one: the atrocity at Al Qaeda's hands, but also the US response, whose persisting legacy is two failed wars, torture, indefinite detention, a new generation of wounded and often betrayed warriors, and a coarsening of the national spirit in response to cynically manufactured fears.

As the times grew diabolically interesting, the challenges, by the terms of my worldview, became more urgent: to stop a war based in lies, to shut down the off-shore gulag of Guantanamo, to unseat an administration of Constitution-shredding oil oligarchs, and to build anew and improve America's shattered moral compass. I had not thought my desires

Faustian, nor had I wished quite for this. Even knowing it was largely delusion, I have sometimes looked longingly at the “don’t worry, be happy” culture of my historically tepid youth.

I have also wondered what it must be like for my students — not even teenagers in 2001 — to have been sprung, at the moment of ripening awareness, into this miasma. In countless conversations, they have expressed that this slop is all they’ve ever known: Bin Laden and his ghosts, torture, rendition, candy-striped threat levels, if-you-see-something-say-something, subway searches, rampant profiling, and a future mortgaged by unfunded military conflicts, all bundled as the “war on terror.” It’s not that, as for a past generation, the promised light at the end of war’s tunnel was forever just around the bend; the current message is that the tunnel has no light, has no end.

Hearing my exasperated students, and with a paternalism born of age and my recent fatherhood, my heart sinks. The birthright of every generation is to have at least the illusion of innocence. When it shatters, it should ideally be on one’s one terms, as one’s budding critical consciousness begins to measure the gap between promise and reality, and one’s soul rebels against that chasm. To have circumstance rob innocence so harshly and so young seems an offense.

I have similarly wondered what it must be like for this specific cohort of graduates to have entered college, as if by some sick honor, exactly as the financial crisis hit four years ago. The Class of 2012: the Crisis Kids, Generation Hexed, Doomed R Us. Their futures have been mortgaged also by the rapacious engines of greed and a broader system predicated on inequality, confirmed by decades of trend-lines. This day, this ceremony radiate with a sense of accomplishment and pride, felt by all here. But we all know that the future — clouded by personal debt, a dismal employment picture, and other hazards — has perhaps never looked less bright for college graduates, let alone for those without the means to attend college. College itself, once a great means of social mobility but growing less accessible for the American masses, is increasingly victim of our sour times, lending a defiant pathos just to our being here today.

The dim outlook is confirmed by surreal conversations I've had with graduating seniors and recent alums, which bear none of the "world is my oyster" optimism of seasons past. In one exchange, a gifted writing major conveyed gratitude that she had locked into a highly coveted, low-wage service job in her sophomore year and thus could survive life after Lang, barely. In another, a student clung to a stubborn "I'll be damned if I can't make my dream come true" faith in herself. Her classmate, in retort, expressed horror that her own success might mean stepping over the bodies of the less fortunate or less lucky. Finally, a young man allowed, "Well, if nobody can make it anymore, that at least takes the pressure off, right?" Graduation as the hollow prize, an oyster with no pearl, but at least this thread of silver.

For years, I regarded with bemusement the ritual claim of pundits that the most recent generation bore burdens none of its predecessors had. The recent cant is that never before have young people been so over-scheduled, managed, diagnosed, medicated, tested, marketed, networked, friended, and gamed. Adding all this to the above, perhaps both "objective conditions" and subjective experience have caught up with the hype, bidding the next of my inherited slogans.

This one, a single word, comes from my French-speaking Turkish father, and was reserved in my family, with near sacred honor, for moments in our lives of extraordinary adversity. The word is "cou-rage" – courage. Courage, and generosity along with it, is nothing I have to instruct today's youth — and Lang students in particular — to have. Rather, they are qualities I have seen in so many of them as they have tried to make sense of and reshape their own moment. Their flowering, most obviously manifest in Occupy Wall Street but evident in other worthy pursuits, has made these worst of times also the best. This year, far and away, has been the most exciting I have ever experienced on an American campus, defined by an almost indescribable atmosphere at The New School of fellow-feeling, shared purpose, and creativity.

Occupy Wall Street has been analyzed and rhapsodized ad nauseum. I myself feel like I've read five commentaries for every protestor who ever set foot in Zuccotti Park. I will therefore not burden you with the familiar, and instead speak of OWS selectively, stressing how tethered it has been to The New School. To be sure, its antecedents lie elsewhere, in

Tunisia, Egypt, Spain, and Wisconsin. But for young people here, it originated, in a real sense, in a choice. Their temptation, I imagine, has been to be overwhelmed by and resigned to circumstance, or perhaps to wallow in "woe is us," or to compete twice as hard to muscle out their peers in pursuit of mutually desired prizes. But instead, in dramas of individual awakening repeated thousands of times over, they chose to understand their own predicaments within larger contexts — to interrogate the institutions and social structures that inhibit human thriving; cynically create winners and losers, creditors and debtors; immunize criminals, punish the innocent, and frisk the profiled; sack the planetary commons; and blight the lives of so many with white supremacy, sexism, homophobia and other ills.

By some social alchemy not reducible to Facebook, they then found each other, and began collaborating, politicking, and assembling. And crucially, they found the courage to take their anger and hope into the streets in new ways — to assert not simply their right to speak their mind, but to have their thinking and values matter. Domestically, the result has been a loud rebuke to the Tea Party diet of fewer taxes and smaller government as the cure for America's ills, and a deeper challenge to the neo-liberal consensus enjoined by both parties. More broadly, Occupy has contributed to a movement of world-historical significance, already likened by wise heads to the democratic upheavals of 1968 or 1848. Rather than being its victims, young people have chosen to turn private grievance into public good and again make history.

Likely no university in America has contributed as much to Occupy as has The New School. Reciting names is unnecessary, and anyhow anathema to Occupy's suspicion of celebrity. So, in a spirit of collective attribution, and with an historian's sense, I'll report that New School students and alums were central to the original plan to occupy Zuccotti Park and present there from day one. Kettled, maced, and arrested en masse on the Brooklyn Bridge, our students helped raise the profile of the movement, make it a national phenomenon. New Schoolers have populated general assemblies, planned and led marches and direct actions, rushed to Zuccotti in the middle of the night to defend it from eviction, occupied bank lobbies, blocked foreclosure auctions by singing in courtrooms, been beaten, cuffed, and jailed, and seeded the movement with their ideas, energy, and talent.

Recognizing Occupy's local and national importance early on, the student newspaper, *The New School Free Press*, covered the movement with admirable professionalism and zeal. A literary journal based at the New School spun off the *Occupy Gazette*, providing a real-time ethnography of the protest culture and a vital forum for debate. New School staff have been in the mix as well, gathering books for the "People's Library," since purloined by police, and spearheading Occupy Radio. Faculty and senior administrators have not only sponsored countless symposia on Occupy, but marched shoulder to shoulder with the students. Finally, with an ill-conceived and fated occupation of a student center, New School students at least tried to open up a new space for the broader movement just days after Zuccotti Park was raided. In sum, Occupy Wall Street would have existed without The New School; but I'm certain that it would have been something different, and lesser, without The New School.

To be sure, not everyone at the New School has equally embraced Occupy; I don't mean to define the culture of the institution by a vocal subset. A student of mine, with a Zen-like sense of paradox, complained, "What am I supposed to do? Quit the job I have to pay off my loans so I can stand with a sign and scream that I have no job and can't pay my loans." Foreign students and people of color, fearing arrest or harsh treatment by police, have sometimes stayed away from demonstrations, while the often macho heir and more-radical-than-thou posturing of some activists has repelled potential supporters. Finally, some students do not share the assumptions or values or style of Occupy; they embody the challenge of pluralism, in a country of immense ideological and experiential diversity, with which the broader movement has in no way come to terms.

Even so, the affinity of the school for Occupy has been potent, and begs explanation. The easy take is that Occupy extends the legacy of critical thinking that has defined The New School, most strongly when a haven for German-Jewish intellectuals fleeing Nazism. That much is true. But equally important, Occupy is driven by the desire — more a product of the 1960s than the 1930s, and more the creed of Eugene Lang College than of the historic New School — to align one's values and conduct, to give, through action, consequences to one's convictions. This is precisely the synthesis I try to model as a scholar-teacher-activist and the aspiration, of students and faculty alike, that makes this environment so special and giving

to the world.

I conclude with a final slogan, this time one of my own favorites, that reframes the quality of education here, while pointing to challenges to come. A sociologist once said, “If you really want to understand something, try to change it.” New School students, to their credit, have thrown themselves against the rock of this knowledge by taking on the entrenched powers of their society. But change is hard, as the fierce fissures in the movement and police response attest, and understanding also. For all its achievements, Occupy Wall Street — vastly less robust than just three months ago — is, by its own exalted ambitions, off to a good start, little more. One can’t so easily bend history to one’s will; likewise, the conviction that radical transformation is politically and morally necessary does not itself mean that it is likely or that sufficient others hold the same belief. But the very effort at change yields knowledge of its own dynamic and possibility, as well as of its object, and should never be abandoned.

You have your whole lifetimes to figure it out, as do we all. I hope you, and we, succeed. Only the whole world is watching.