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ON MAKING THE WORLD A LESS DANGEROUS PLACE

When your Chief of Staff asked me to join you today, I am sure she had no idea just how important high school, a teacher there, and the UN actually were to me. For reasons I will explain, it was not at all clear that I would finish high school let alone attend college. But a teacher saved me and so did the UN.

I was able to go to college on a scholarship because I won some national competitions debating the topic: "Resolved that the United Nations should be significantly strengthened." While that question was framed 50 years ago, it is still worth considering. You will find out why in the days ahead. Critics of the UN say it is ineffective. Supporters say that it still needs to be significantly strengthened. And pretty much all of the commentators acknowledge that if we did not have a UN today, we would soon invent one.

After one of my debate contests, I was given a trip to New York City. It was my dream actually to see the UN building, take a tour, and visit the bookshop. My aunt and uncle lived in Brooklyn and offered me a place to stay. And the chance to do something special. To the utter horror of their two boys, I proposed a trip into the city to see the UN instead of a baseball game. Back then my hope was that someday I would work at the UN. Since the Institute's headquarters is right across the street, I think I came pretty close.

My other dream was to become a printer. And so I took the vocational track in my high school. My aim was to spend as much time in our print shop as possible. With the death of my mother and my father's hard times, I was pretty much at loose ends. And we sure were busy printing, from the football schedule, to the play programs, to blank report cards which the teachers filled in by hand. I printed a few extra (and began filling them in). My grades took a dramatic turn for the better. The punishment was banishment from going near the print shop ever again.

The teacher who saved me was the debate coach who noticed that I had a big mouth and that maybe I could put it to use. The school was asked to send candidates to Optimist Club speaking contest and she volunteered me. And four others. Just before it was my turn to speak, for some reason I put a very large green olive in my mouth, then heard my name called. I swallowed the olive – for which I had no particular craving – along with the pit inside it and proceeded to give my speech. I came in third; actually, there was a tie for third place. But my teacher made me winner. So I am glad you are here with your teachers because they can have that effect. And when they do, please remember to reach out and say thank you.

What the Institute does by giving students a chance to study and live in another country is designed to make the world a less dangerous place. Our founders won Nobel Peace Prizes for

their work and theories about how education could avert war. International educational exchange does this for sure, but it does not always work and we have had an awful lot of wars. I wish our track record was as good as Tom Friedman's Big Mac Peace Theory; namely, that no two countries that both have a McDonalds have ever fought a war against each other. This was remarkably true until the war between Russia and Georgia in 2008 and then again in 2014 when Russia seized Crimea from the Ukraine.

In our case, the fact that the Institute began exchanging students from Japan, Germany, and the Soviet Union in the early 1920s did not prevent World War II or the Cold War. But it surely lessened tensions during the many years of the latter and contributed to the magnanimity with which the United States approached the defeated countries after the former. The Fulbright Program itself grew out of the War and was financed for many years entirely by forgiving war debts, leading the historian Arnold Toynbee to call it "one of the really generous and imaginative things that have been done in the world since World War Two."

Then as now, the Institute's advice to students is to make international a part of your education. You will find that this is not as easy as it sounds. Most Americans today do not have a passport and over half of those who do are over the age of 60. Fewer than ten percent of undergraduates study abroad, despite many entering college hoping to do so. That is why the Institute launched "Generation Study Abroad," an initiative that aims to double the number of Americans who study abroad by the end of this decade. It is our "moonshot." And while even though planet earth is a lot closer than the moon, it will take the help of all here to reach the goal. Please join us.

We need champions for study abroad to help students at every stage of the process, and this begins in high school. That is why we are asking 1,000 teachers to join us as commitment partners to encourage their students to get a passport and to make plans early to use it in college. Freshmen advisers need to make sure students have a passport and are open to an international experience well before they enter their junior years. Faculty need to encourage and suggest ways a study abroad experience can fit into the curriculum at several different points and time. Coaches need to accommodate their athletes. Parents need to encourage their kids.

Does the experience make a difference?

We know the experience is transformative. You will think differently about the country and cultures you visit, but also about yourself and the country from which you came. You will see that there are differences, but you will also find something that will make those less important, as I learned attending one in-gathering of Fulbright students in Colorado. We went around the room for introduction and there must have been a dozen countries represented. Each person spoke about what they were studying and where they were from. There were as you might expect many different accents and even national dress. The last person to introduce himself said he was studying to be an astronaut. His voice was high pitched and he stood before us in his native Kameez, describing the city in Pakistan where he grew up. And I thought to myself,

"Wow. How different we all are." Then the student said what he had learned so far from meeting Fulbright colleagues from literally all over the world was how much they all had in common. "We all want to get an education. We want to live in peace. And we want to make the world better for our children."

Amen.

You will also find ways to make a difference in the lives of others. A couple years ago my work took me to Beijing where our office arranged a dinner with the American Fulbright students then in the middle of their China projects. Most were working or teaching at universities and libraries in the capitol or within an hour or two train ride away. The woman next to me, however, told me it had taken her two days to get to Beijing.

She explained that she is an environmental science graduate student from the Ohio State University, doing her PhD on river water micro-organisms in Northwest China. Her field research project involved collecting samples in a very remote village. To get to Beijing, she told me, you had to take several busses, then a train, and finally an air flight. She assured me there were plenty of things in Chinese river water to analyze.

Naturally, I assumed she was in town to get some of her samples tested.

She said no and, in fact, had not brought any of her water with her. She had come to Beijing to try to arrange a surgery for a young girl in the village who was badly injured in a car crash. The father had been killed, the mother crippled, and the nine-year-old girl sustained many problematic head injuries.

Now this remote village rarely sees any outsiders. Perhaps this tall, blond, Buckeye from Ohio was the first American in the village's five thousand year history that had ever gone there. She is certainly someone they will never forget.

"What else could I do? If the girl did not get help, she would have absolutely no future. And no one would care for her when I left. And maybe I was the only person that could find a medical mission group that could help her. I can always collect water samples. This was Liang's only one chance, maybe, at living her life." So in this very remote village where no U.S. diplomat may ever visit, we have friends.

Taken together, what international education does for you and for those you meet can indeed make the world we share less dangerous. And it means that all of us contribute, in the words of the old debate topic, to a "significantly strengthened" United Nations.