

English College in Prague: Graduation speech

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I'll begin by stating the obvious: your final year at the English College was not what you expected!

Let's be nostalgic for how it should have been: in September 2020, you should have returned to school as top dogs; you would have swung along the corridors and up and down the stairs knowing that there was no-one more senior than you, that no one knew more than you did, and that you were the best year ever. And in [January? February?] 2021 this should have culminated in the Graduation Ball, that rite of passing when you could show the world that you were taking over.

Instead of this – lockdown! Day after day in your own room, following your lessons with no transition between home and school, no hope of participating in all the activities that usually form the experience of “school”, no exchanges with classmates who normally help each other out when someone runs into a problem in class. You may have missed something you were looking forward to: a special holiday, a family wedding; a once in a lifetime sports event, a leading role onstage; and some of you may have had Covid strike in your own family, may even have lost a much-loved friend or member of the family. It's been tough, I know.

However - I remember the students I knew in Czechoslovakia forty years ago, who were in lockdown for a lifetime, or so it seemed at the time. This was when I was working for what was called the “underground university” which existed mainly in Prague, Brno and Bratislava, and which was organised and taught by professors who had been thrown out of Czechoslovak universities because they were considered to be politically unreliable. Among them were Ivan Havel, who died only two months ago, and Jirina Siklova, who died only one month ago. There are many more; the most famous of course was Jan Patočka, and it is sometimes called the Patočka university. The professors, on indefinite furlough, used to organise seminars on Plato, Kant, or analytical philosophy in someone's home, and teach groups of students there; later there were courses in political science, modern history and sociology, in art, music and literature. I call them students, but these young people were not allowed to be students because they did not have, as it was described, “the correct political attitude”. Instead of going to university, they had to take whatever low-paid jobs they could find. They were not studying for the sake of their careers – they knew they had no career – but, as one of the students told me at the time, “to learn how to live in this world of Communism and lies”. They were, so to speak, in quarantine, not only unable to travel or to attend school and university, but in many cases unable to join in their contemporaries' activities. Some of them who were watched by the secret police had to warn their friends not to visit them or even greet them in the street – it was as though they carried an infection.

And yet the foreign professors who came to teach in these home seminars used to return to Britain amazed by how positive and enthusiastic these young people were; how eager they were for knowledge. It was my job to prepare these visits, and along with the philosopher Roger Scruton, who had himself been expelled from Czechoslovakia for his underground activities, I used to brief the British visitors before they left, and debrief them when they got back. They said they had never

before met students so deeply engaged. Life was tough for these students, but of those who attended the secret seminars, I never heard any of them say that they regretted it – rather, that it made them stronger.

I am sure that many of you will be able to understand that, and will know what I mean when I say that that this could, in some respects, turn out to be one of the best things that could have happened to you. You have had to find your way through an extraordinary situation, one that demanded all your inner resources, a situation that tested you in ways you had never imagined. And you succeeded! You won through! While regretting what was missed, you can be proud of having overcome this crisis, and even be grateful for what it has taught you.

I am addressing the graduates, because you are the most important people here today, but what I am saying also applies to your parents, to your teachers, and to all the support staff, in whatever field. They have been through it all with you; they have watched over you, encouraged you, helped you to keep going when things got too much – and at the same time they have had to manage their own lives; and because of the nature of the English College in Prague, many of them, including your headmaster, have had to do this while separated for a long period from their own families.

I hope too, that it has helped you to appreciate each other all the more; in the months when you did not automatically see each other day by day, when you had to make a positive effort to keep in touch, when you had to think “Who needs me? Who might be in trouble?”, that this way of thinking might have become a habit, that even when you do not see somebody for a long time, you will still be thinking about them and what they might need.

Do not imagine that from now on life will be trouble free; all of you will, at one time or another, have to face up again to difficult circumstances, to disappointment and failure; to loneliness and loss. But now you know that you have the strength to see it through. You have found your inner selves. When trouble comes again, you can say: I came through before, I can come through again; I fought Covid and won; I can fight this and win too.

Barbara Day