

Remarks to All School Assembly

“Living the IMSA Values: Respecting our Cultural Differences”

Tuesday, February 7, 2017, Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy, Aurora, Illinois

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Last September, during Labor Day weekend, I took my 6-year old grandson, Malachi bowling. Of course, we had to have the bumpers up against the railing, which helped me immensely with my own gutter balls. During one of the games, when Malachi threw his ball it got kind of stuck between our lane and the one next to ours. The ball was almost at the other lane when I instantaneously dashed toward the ball. I didn't realize, or had forgotten, that the lanes are greased and very slippery. Upon crossing the line, I immediately went up about 3 feet in the air and hit the floor hard. Hard! It took the breath out of me. I ended up with bruised ribs.

The events of the other day that we're here to discuss likewise crossed the line and took the breath out of me. As IMSA President, I felt kicked or punched in the gut. This event saddened me on several levels.

1. I'm saddened that we, at IMSA, you, our young people, didn't realize that this act of using symbols such as KKK, the Confederate flag, etc. was insensitive and hurt your peers and your staff and faculty. For some the symbol of the confederate flag and KKK are similar to those of the swastika from Nazi Germany symbolizing oppression and terrorism.
2. I'm saddened that we, at IMSA, you, our young people, didn't realize that by being silent and not confronting these actions, checking and supporting each other, was tantamount to supporting and advocating, even if you don't mean it, the ideals represented by these symbols of hatred.
3. I'm saddened that we, at IMSA, you, especially our students of color, as I have been told, were not quite shocked by this...in fact, I have heard that some of the reactions were “We were waiting for or we knew that something like this would happen.”

I believe that some of you might be saying to yourself and others, “Why make such a big fuzz about a joke; we were just trying to be funny.” And, believe me, I don't believe that those who placed the post on Facebook are racists, or bigots, or mean. We can all agree that they were not thoughtful, however. This morning, one person involved in this incident came to my office and personally apologized for being insensitive. I told this student that this act hurt fellow students. I don't judge people's intentions or motives, I can't see into their hearts, but I can say that, and I shared this with the student, I can say that actions have consequences. Actions

have consequences to the individual involved as well as to IMSA as a community. Know this: we don't tolerate this behavior.

The historical reality is that race matters in the US now in 2017 as it did 8 years ago when then President Barak Obama gave his "Race Speech." Race matters now as it did when Cornell West wrote his book in 1993 titled Race Matters. Incidentally, I recommend both of these documents for your consideration and reflection. Race matters now as it did when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. led marches, boycotts, and speeches in the 1960's. Remember, just a few weeks ago when Shawon Jackson '11, quoted Dr. King's statement that "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice." It only bends when we bend it. We must speak out against insensitivity even in our midst.

Enough said. Let's recommit ourselves to our beliefs here at IMSA. We believe that...

- All people have equal intrinsic worth.
- All people have choices and are responsible for their actions.
- Belonging to a community requires commitment to the common good.
- Honesty, trust and respect are vital for any relationship to thrive.

We stopped classes today because I believe that we needed to pause, recognize our values as an IMSA family, and recommit ourselves fully to them. We need to restate that as a community, we don't tolerate these actions. We have zero tolerance for these types of actions against each other.

We need to support one another emotionally, academically, and socially. If you need to speak with anyone at Student Counseling Services, individually or in small groups, I know that Kevin Kusy and Karen Schwartz are available. Please seek them out. We are all part of this community and we want to support each one of you. We need to continue to respect our cultural differences. We need to realize that silence is complicit consent, as I wrote in my personal reflection last week when I quoted the words of [Martin Niemöller](#), the Protestant pastor best remembered for the following quotation:

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out-  
Because I was not a Socialist.  
Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out-  
Because I was not a Trade Unionist.  
Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out-  
Because I was not a Jew.  
Then they came for me-and there was no one left to speak for me.*

I read that Martin "spent his last seven years of Nazi rule in concentration camps."

Let me conclude by quoting from former President Obama's race speech, given at the National Constitution Center, Philadelphia, on March 18, 2008. He said, "Race is an issue that I believe this nation cannot afford to ignore right now." We cannot afford to ignore this in 2017 either.

Obama quoted William Faulkner when he wrote, "The past isn't dead and buried. In fact, it isn't even past." And then, urged us to share his conviction that "working together we can move beyond some of our old racial wounds."

"In the end, then," he said, "what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world's great religions demand-that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper."

You know when I fell hard on the floor of that bowling alley because I crossed the line to the slippery side; I lost my breath and bruised my ribs. It took some time to recover my breath just as it will take us some time to recover from this event where a line was crossed. I didn't recover by going back to bowling immediately. I needed to heal.

We also need to heal. The best way for us to heal as we leave this gym is to use this event as an opportunity to learn more about others here. Increase our own personal sensitivity and recognize that our actions have consequences for ourselves and for our IMSA family. Speak up when you see or believe that your brother or your sister needs you.

Thank you.