Charge to the Graduating Class of IMSA

I considered a number of snazzy subjects for my remarks to you today:

The Unexpurgated Story of the Big Bang
The Unbearable Lightness of Neutrinos
Symmetry, Complexity and the Origin of Eagle Foods

I then said: this is a serious period: and a whole host of charges come to mine: for example:

Get rich so you can contribute to IMSA’s Endowment
Get so rich you have an unlisted telephone company
or
Don’t go to college - instead, go to Paris.
Fall in love with two people at the same time
Meet a Zen Buddhist and take him to lunch

But then what was bothering me surfaced: What so many of you have that is so unique and this is independent of academic prowess - what is so valuable is what I call "the clarity of vision that reflects the unencumbered young mind." Let me explain: well, remember the parable of the Emperor's New Clothes? For scientists that story, in retrospect, raises goose pimples: the child saw the truth. The child was free of dogma, of inculcated beliefs or prejudices. The child blurted it out - "Mom, the Emperor is naked!" This is why most of the great breakthroughs in physics and math were made by people in the teens and early twenties - their minds were still unencumbered by the body of knowledge that would soon constrain their clarity of vision. More serious examples proliferate.
Let's take the tragic case of Einstein - probably the most brilliant and productive mind of our century - the man who, as a young man (in 1905 he was 26) overturned our view of space and time, was too burdened by his belief in the objective reality that he never accepted the equally revolutionary ideas of quantum mechanics. Einstein lost that clarity of vision and was overridden by the younger generation of physicists who eventually triumphed so that the quantum theory today is the abc of modern physics and chemistry. My favorite story which illustrates the opposite of the unencumbered mind has to do with the two ostriches, both female and attractive, for ostriches. They were walking down the beach ...

There are many other examples from all fields - don't think it is easy to keep your mind free of the garbage that inevitably accumulates - also I don't know of any nutritional trick, vitamins or injections that will preserve that youthful clarity - well - one trick perhaps your teachers know that trick. It is the trick of immersing yourself in youth. That is why I'm giving up the Directorship of the world's most fantastic laboratory to teach again at the U of C. It is a desperate attempt to hold on to the remnants of that ability to view the world through the clear eye. Perhaps then I'll see some of you in class. I might visit you at the U of I or Northwestern - but for those of you who have opted to go elsewhere - say Stanford or MIT, well I suppose you can eke out some sort of education there .... kidding.

Now I do have another charge to hang on you.

There is something I believe you should feel very strongly about these days - today marks your entry into a particularly important, very special category of responsible socio-political beings: you are joining the world-wide group which the media call "students." As such you should
feel a certain oneness, a certain empathy with your colleagues around the world - you have much more in common with them than would appear from a contrast of language, state of your dormitories, classrooms, equipment and standard of living. I want to point out that the students leading the struggle for democracy in Tiananmen Square and the students who have similarly been in the vanguard of the quest for freedom from Moscow to Nigeria to Argentina and Brazil and let's not forget your parent's generation who died in Mississippi for civil rights and protested the bad war in Vietnam in the late 60's - they are all your colleagues and they have risked their lives and their careers for what you have and take for granted - DEMOCRACY. When your brothers and sisters die for democracy in Beijing you get an extra burden - a burden not to take democracy for granted, a burden to inform yourselves and to vote and to not be too cynical about the imperfections of our democracy.. Oh yes democracy is no cure for human nature - we have corruption and greed as you know from the headlines. We have corrupting power affecting the products of our finest schools, men like Mr. Wright and the crooked judges exposed by the Greylords Investigation and the political circus that often plays in the City of Chicago. The weaknesses in democracy show up in the facts of our grossly unequal society, with the millions of people below the poverty level, with all kinds of injustices of which racial and religions are still among the worst.

But we have a system in which we can read about it, see it on TV, and we can have a hand in making it work better ... and when we read about young students mowed down by the order of old men, hiding under their desks of power - then you, especially you, their fellow students have this extra responsibility to treasure the democracy we have and to look up from your books and computers and devote some of your
time and effort to the political arena; to preserving and improving the freedoms we have.

I am especially proud of the fact that physicist Andre Sakharov in the Soviet Union and Physicist Fang Li Zhi of the PRC, are leading dissidents who have risked their lives and fortunes for the sake of social justice.

“Politics” should not be a perjorative word - “politician” should not be a term of contempt. I’d like some of you to choose that kind of career. If you feel you have the talent, go that way. Learn some more science, learn a lot of history, soak up the wisdom of the humanities and then go for it.

After all - you’ve seen and heard our great governor. It can’t be that hard! Similarly for you potential physicists, you’ve seen Lederman and you know it can’t be that hard.

I’m sorry to have raised so solemn an issue but if I catch any of you not voting (when you reach the legal age!) I’ll haunt you and the prospect of being haunted by Lederman should be mind-numbing.

This pioneer class has exceeded my expectations. I am proud of you, I love you, I wish you tremendous success. I also plead with you to stay in touch - write to me soon about how I can help make IMSA better - the success of each succeeding class will inevitably reflect glory on you. Write me at Fermilab where I will still have a tiny office. And so --- I’ll use the European form of farewell - Au Revoir - Auf Veidersehen. And don’t worry about me, for in the words of the poet: “it is a far, far better thing I do now than I have ever done, it is a far, far better place I go to than Harvard.” Have a good life!