Coininenceinent Speech to the Students of Grand Valley State University

Tommy E. Remengesau Jr.

Grand Valley State University

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr

Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/gvr/vol26/iss1/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grand Valley Review by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.
Commencement Speech to the Students of Grand Valley State University

Thank you very much. It’s good to be back in Grand Valley, which forever shall always be my home away from home. Never in my wildest dreams would I have anticipated standing before you today when I arrived here 27 years ago. In fact, when I arrived here during the winter of that year, in December, all I could really think about was how incredibly cold I was.

You see, every day, of every year, Palau has a temperature of between 83 and 90 degrees. Bad days are 83 degrees. Good days are 90 degrees. The warm season varies from 85 to 90 degrees. The cold season varies from 83 to 88 degrees. And yes, there are seasons in Palau. Or so I thought, when I decided to come to Grand Valley to take advantage of your fine school’s educational opportunities. In fact, I pored over books and magazines before I began my travels to gain an understanding of what my life would be through my college years. I had even seen pictures of little white flakes falling from the sky during what was referred to as “winter.” They looked rather harmless.

So I packed my heavy clothes. Jeans, tea-shirts, short-sleeved dress shirts, and of course my slippers, which you call flip-flops or thongs. When I stepped off of the plane in one of my four pairs of jeans and tea-shirt after a 30-hour flight, I thought a terrible mistake had been made. Somehow I had mistakenly been delivered into hell, and to my surprise, it was not full of flames and gasses. It was white, windy and so cold that I would have turned around if the man behind me hadn’t bumped me when I stopped walking. And that is how I arrived

the great state of Michigan.

I not at all sure what I had done bad to define culture shou-
der to Tommy Remengesau Jr. in 1975.

Grand Valley State University, called Grand Valley State Colle-

You see, with me today, an alumnus and the rest of the Palau in the govern-

im. You see, with me today, an alumnus and the rest of Palau.

I also have graduated from this institution. While I thought that my own experiences when I was growing up in the Republic of Palau does not define all Americans. But we have a special friendship and relationship with the Uni-

My understanding of what it meant to be a friend of the United States is to gain our independence was called the “Companionship” and the relationship with the United States was

is arrangement has proved mutually beneficial to both our nations and the region. Palau is the United States’ ally among the small island de-

We both share strong con-

Our shared Christi-

 guarantees that this friendship will far into the future.


The great state of Michigan. Very young, very cold and not at all sure what I had gotten myself into. If you had to define culture shock, you could simply refer to Tommy Remengesau, Jr. on that December afternoon in 1975.

Grand Valley State University, which back then was still called Grand Valley State College with only 8,000 enrollees, can be proud of its legacy with my country, Palau. You see, with me today, is my country’s Minister of Finance who was a fellow classmate and alumnus of this great institution. Our last Ambassador to Japan is also an alumnus and the rest of the alumni are all who’s who in Palau in the government and private sector. In addition to myself, I also have a sister and brother who also graduated from this institution after me.

While I thought that my country was the center of the universe when I was growing up, I now realize that the Republic of Palau does not always register on the minds of all Americans. But we have a special friendship and relationship with the United States in a treaty we signed called the “Compact of Free Association” upon gaining our independence in 1994 and becoming a member of the United Nations.

Under this unique relationship, Palau would receive economic assistance as well as assistance in education, health and residency status in America in return for the rights of the United States to establish military bases in Palau. Palau would control its internal and foreign affairs while the United States would be responsible for defense and security matters.

This arrangement has proved to be successful and mutually beneficial to both our countries and the security of the region. Palau is the U.S. strongest friend and ally among the small island developing nations of the Pacific. We both share strong commitments to freedom, democracy, peace and security among all nations.

Prior to our independence in 1994, Palau was a trust territory of the United States since after World War II. So not only are we friends, we are special friends, a friendship built upon years of interaction and mutual participation in Palau’s development into an independent nation. Our shared Christian values and political principles guarantees that this friendship will continue far into the future.
So when the United States was attacked on September 11th, Palau was one of the, first countries of the world to offer its support. In fact, we offered the use of our airport, our seaports and other facilities to the United States in its fight against the enemy global enemy to us all—Terrorism. Let me say that each and every one of you should take great pride in the position that your country has taken to fight international terrorism. Freedom survives only through the will of its people. Freedom is an obligation, not just a right. And the United States has undertaken its responsibility, not only to its citizens, but also to all the free citizens of the world, including those in my own country.

You see, the world is becoming a very small place. When the jet liners crashed into the World Trade Towers and into the Pentagon, we watched the event on our televisions. In fact, many of us called friends in the United States and told them to turn on their televisions. The bombings in Bali and the Philippines by Al Qaida and related organizations have now occurred at our back door. With our close relations to the United States, and our proximity to such organizations, we must protect ourselves from enemies that we did not know existed just a few years ago. Likewise, when 9/11 occurred, our tourism was significantly impacted, and our overall economy damaged.

With this new proximity of nations and people comes a new responsibility to each and every one of us. We can no longer separate ourselves from another's problems. It is no longer possible, or reasonable, to ignore the issues that do not strike our own native shores. When terrorism strikes the economy of one democracy, it strikes the economies of all democratic economies. When industrialization pollutes the atmosphere and the oceans, the tides in non-industrial nations rise.

All the people of the world must therefore alter their perceptions and philosophies regarding growth and development to one which emphasizes the sustainability of the world. The environment is everyone's environment. It is therefore the responsibility of all nations and all people. As a member of this world community, I would urge each and everyone of you to play an active role in ensuring our, global survival.

We must therefore take a new approach to world events, to our neighbors and to one another. We must open our eyes to new realities. This requires an active approach to positive recognition of alternate possibilities.

When I arrived in Michigan, I knew that I had to deal with a very boring and lonely life at Grand Valley State and go through the process of change or run home and my very warm home. I chose to accept what, for me, was an extremely difficult challenge. We all have very different values. Yet at our core, I believe in different. However, in order to survive, we must first recognize and confront them. Not with disdain and pessimism.

This applies at the individual level, and every level in between. It requires an active approach to the world out to America and to America's prosperity. In this process, I not only expanded my own values and aspirations, but also expanded my own. I have absolute experience. I would not be the President of Palau today were it not for my decision to return to Palau. I would not have returned to Palau. I would not have been able to take on the challenge. I would not have been able to serve my country and taking the course of action that I am today.

My decision to return to Palau was made largely because of my friendship, my new friends, fellow students. I chose to go to Grand Valley State and go through the process of change or run home and my very warm home. I chose to accept what, for me, was an extremely difficult challenge. We all have very different values. Yet at our core, I believe in different. However, in order to survive, we must first recognize and confront them. Not with disdain and pessimism.

This applies at the individual level, and every level in between. It requires an active approach to the world out to America and to America's prosperity. In this process, I not only expanded my own values and aspirations, but also expanded my own. I have absolute experience. I would not be the President of Palau today were it not for my decision to return to Palau. I would not have returned to Palau. I would not have been able to take on the challenge. I would not have been able to serve my country and taking the course of action that I am today.
States was attacked on September 11, one of the first countries to report. In fact, we offered our ports and other facilities to fight against the enemy global threat. Let me say that each and every one of us has taken great pride in the positions we have taken to fight terrorism. It is only through the will of all of us that we can achieve our goals. And we, as free citizens of the world, have now occurred at close relations to the United Nations and to the Philippines by organizations. This applies at the individual level and at the global level, and every level in between. As a Palauan, I had to reach out to America and to Americans to survive and prosper. In this process, I not only came to understand some of your values and aspirations, I also altered and expanded my own. I have absolutely no regrets from this experience. I would not be who I am today, had I not come to Grand Valley. Once I realized that I wouldn’t freeze to death and that my fellow students were open to my friendship, I responded by opening my mind to all the possibilities before me. In the final analysis, I gave up fear and undertook adventure.

Had I not taken this approach, I certainly would not be the President of Palau today. In fact, I might not even have returned to Palau. I could have stayed in the United States and made significantly more money and advance myself professionally with greater ease. But by opening my mind to the unknown, without fear, I was able to take on the challenge of returning to my own country and taking the course that led me to being here today.

My decision to return to Palau and to run for political office was made largely because of what I came to school, here at Grand Valley State University. This educational institution provided me with the ability to define my own personal challenge, and then to pursue it. And it
was not an easy one. When I returned home, I was no longer well known in the community. So I had to reestablish old relationships and create new ones. When I ran for the Senate for the first time, at age 28, I had to go from house to house and introduce myself and make people believe that I was not inadequate, too young and too inexperienced. I worked very hard and was lucky enough to become the youngest Senator in the history of my country. Eight years later, I was able to become the youngest Vice-President in Palau’s history. And finally, eight years after that, I became the youngest President in Palau’s history.

And I owe much of this success to that moment in time, when I did not turn around and walk back into that warm and luxurious plane and ask to be taken home. I returned to my home and to my future of my own free will and with my own plan.

From my experience in this beautiful, majestic and four-seasoned Michigan, I would only recommend to each of you that you not permit fear to guide your future. Fear is a very insidious thing. Remember the famous saying, “there is nothing to fear but fear itself.” It limits your options without your even knowing it. It closes opportunities that you do not even know exist. It directs you to the left when you should be looking right.

College is secondarily about education. College is primarily about exploring options. These options will present themselves only if you ignore the fear and open your eyes to innovation. Once you have opened your eyes, you must then commit yourself through drive and motivation.

It is not enough to give it the old college try. You have to give it your very best effort. Competition in this modern world is fierce. While technology is now available as never before to speed up processes and results, the fundamentals remain the same. Only hard work, honesty and commitment will permit you to achieve your ultimate goals.

Finally, remember that limitations and practicality are for your parents and your grandparents. While I would never say, “don’t listen to your mother,” I would say, “after listening to her sage advice, listen to and be guided by your own reality.” Just as the United States and the Republic of Palau must reach out and come to a comprehension about their own realities in this modern world, so too must you reach out and comprehend yourselves so that you are strengthened.

Remember, no one expects results from Division II football nation just as surely, no one expects results from President of Palau. What we can accomplish that no one can find it, I would advise you to do it for the sake of our very small Earth.

Thank You.

Congratulations and ...
When I returned home, I was no part of any community. So I had to reestablish and create new ones. When I first time, at age 28, I had to introduce myself and make myself inadequate, too young and inexperienced very hard and was lucky enough to be the youngest Senator in the history of Palau. Later, I was able to become the youngest Senator in Palau's history. And yet, I became the youngest President of Palau.

I would not recommend to permit fear to guide your future. Remember the famous saying, "Fear itself." It limits you even knowing it. It closes not even know exist. It directs you to be looking right.

College is about education. College is about options. These options will be part of your life. Once you have opened your mind, you must let yourself through drive and determination to be the old college try. You must exert effort. Competition in this modern world, so too must you, reach out and develop yourselves so that you are fulfilled and your country is strengthened.

Remember, no one expected the Lakers to play in the Division II football national championship last year—just as surely, no one expected that I would become the President of Palau. What exactly is it that you want to accomplish that no one would possibly expect? If you can find it, I would advise that you pursue it to the ends of our very small Earth.

Thank You.

Congratulations and God bless you all!