

**2021 Commencement Speech,
Dr. Paul M. Fochtman**



The following speech was delivered during Frankfurt International School's 55th Graduation Ceremony, which took place in the Stroth Center on Friday, 4 June 2021.

Frankfurt International School graduates, parents and virtual guests...FIS Board members, faculty and staff.

I have addressed 17 graduating classes in my time as a Head of School in India and Germany. Each time it is challenging to know what words to say at this critical crossroad, when you are preparing to leave home and beginning the transition from dependency to independence. Many of you are trading your parent perks of home cooked meals, grocery shopping and laundry service for a life that will soon be filled with far greater independence and self-sufficiency.

Of course, my own son has been a college freshman this year and given the bills we continue to pay, I think his claim to independence must be moderated somewhat.

While today we celebrate your time at Frankfurt International School, your education has been a partnership between our school and your home. In our classrooms and around your family dinner tables, you receive lessons that vary from math theorems and global politics to deconstructing a novel or play to probing questions about compassion and suffering. The school and home curriculums may be different, but they share the same goal to prepare you for this next stage of your life.

While the faculty of FIS will no longer be your teachers, I have no doubt that your parents will continue in this role for the rest of your life. The coming years may be a time when you may rely less on their guidance, but if you are like most of humanity, you will eventually find your way back to seeking nourishment from the soil where you were first planted. In fact, even though my parents are no longer alive, I continue to learn from them on a regular basis.

But, unlike most graduating classes, you have had a third teacher this year beyond your family and our school. Although I would never have wished this form of learning upon anyone, the pandemic we have been facing has also inadvertently been a different mentor, particularly to the Class of 2021.

Many philosophers, authors and mystics have warned that we must eventually face hardship in order to grow fully as humans. However, this often happens much later in adulthood and not as you are just at this initiation to the next stage of your lives.

The great English writer Charles Dickens said “Suffering has been stronger than all other teaching. I have been bent and broken, but hopefully into a better shape.”



Mr. Bain in his IB Sports Science Class

Those of you in Mr. Bain’s IB Sports Science class know that the process of muscle growth involves stressing and causing microscopic tears in the muscle. This tearing then prompts the body to respond by rebuilding that muscle to be both larger and stronger. I don’t know that this can be proved by science, but I think the same happens to a person’s character, as tears and trials in our hopes and dreams force us to face a new reality.

It is through facing this reality that we realize that we can not only endure but transcend the challenges before us.

When I was your age, my challenges were rather traditional and predictable. Trying to win the State Tennis Championship, doing my best in school, suffering the occasional relationship woes of an adolescent, and working for my spending money. Nothing happened to me in my high school years that forced me to look much further beyond my own life, my own family, my own country.

But you are different. You are far ahead of where I was at your age. Even before the pandemic struck, your view of the world was already far greater. Your realization of your role to bring about peace and unity in our fractured world is far greater than mine ever was at 18 or 19 years old. Now, adding your experience of this pandemic to your understanding of life, you might be considered what the poet Robert Drake has called “Beautifully Broken.”

I know what you may be thinking. “Thanks Dr. Fochtman, another speech about how lucky we are to have built so much character over the past 18 months.” Please know - I don’t think what you have endured is lucky. This pandemic has been and continues to be a scourge upon our world and I want it gone as quickly as you do. I had thought about sharing a speech that sidestepped the pandemic entirely because you have already heard so much about it.

But then I thought about what we have discovered from our study at FIS about Equity, Justice and Belonging. Among many other things, we learned that it is only by understanding our history, facing differing truths and embracing our identity that we can grow as individuals and as a society.



Kintsugi pottery; photo credit Motoki Tonn

I want to close with a short art lesson that a friend recently shared with me.

The art form on the screen is called Kintsugi. Although its origins are debated, it was likely started in Japan in the 15th century. As you can see from the picture, Kintsugi is the art of taking

a shattered piece of pottery and mending it with a precious metal, usually silver or gold. I find it striking how the gold contrasts with the glaze of the pottery.

There is also clear Zen symbolism behind the reconstructed artwork: Something that has been broken can be even more valuable once put back together. In fact, some collectors would take valuable pottery and intentionally break it so that it could be repaired as Kintsugi.

I will say again that I would never have wished the brokenness that came into our world and our community through this pandemic. But, as we emerge from it, I look at all of you as see a student body who have demonstrated a strength and maturity that is possibly greater than any other class in our school's 60-year history.

I look at you as I look at this Kintsugi art and see veins of gold that not only make you stronger as individuals but stronger as a class, and stronger as body of future leaders that will leave our school to make a positive and lasting difference in our world.

I know I speak for your teachers and your parents, all of whom have watched you endure and mature, when I say that you have earned our respect today not only for what you have learned, but for what you have taught us.

Thank you and congratulations.

Many thanks to my colleague, Director of Admissions Alec Aspinwall, for co-authoring this speech.