

The Journey

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Dear friends

The news roared like thunder. It said that the smart bullet was invented. At last, a bullet that does not fire straight but follows the target until it hurts or kills you.

There must be something wrong when we invest billions to explore life on other planets, yet at the same time we search for more efficient or “smart” ways to kill life itself on this planet.

There is something wrong when in this day and age the stars of the wheels of fortune or reality shows instantly win fame and mythical prizes at a time when people of the arts and letters struggle in solitude to get by and secure next month’s rent.

There is something wrong when entrepreneurship has been identified with opportunity instead of offering value, or manipulation has replaced developing talent.

Dear graduates, I cannot go on any further if at first I don’t ask of what I owe you:

Forgive me!

I belong to the generations that have harmed this planet, disenfranchised you from society and burdened you with an unbearable crisis. Forgive me! They say that the crisis is an economic one. But in reality this is only the symptom of a deeper crisis. Our values are suffering. We have degraded these values at the cost of a worthless way of life. We speak of values as if these are wise words framed and hanging on a wall, a good subject for an exhibition of ideas. But it is these values that guide our choices and shape our lives.

It is the values of the “me”, haste and boasting, which altogether have driven us to bankruptcy as nations and as individuals. We convinced you that a bank account and a fortune are more important indicators of welfare than our happiness. We showed you how not to encourage dialogue as we very often trade in monologues. It seems that one’s victory over another is more important than mutual understanding.

And with this liability in our books, we have the audacity to judge or even to counsel you. This is why, my dear graduates, you have to forgive me. I do not feel I have earned the right to share opinions with you. All that I can share are my own truths. And you never know. They might prove useful some day in your journey.

A road, a path, a journey. We often say, "Go on and find your own way!" which actually means get on with following our own path, or even put your own wagon on our own tracks and follow that trend that we started. And here is the sequence of your life in just a few seconds: you are born, you give your first interview to be accepted into kindergarten, then to primary school and private tutoring, then it's off to high school and tutoring again, national service, university, graduation, your first car, a job, engagement, the first house, marriage, your first born, the children then grow up and get married, and then what? Rest in peace. In this order, in this context.

About three months ago, I passed a billboard advertising a career exhibition displaying the professions of a doctor, a lawyer, an accountant and some other "proper" jobs. There was no mention of artists, actors, musicians and of course plumbers, carpenters and farmers. No mention of poets and explorers. Amazing! Terrifying! In an age where we seek avenues of creativity and diversity, we are continually sending you down the narrow and tired path that we have walked for the past two centuries.

The path for each and every one of us is not out there but in here, from the first day we are born, waiting for us to discover it. How? What raises your curiosity, motivates your imagination, makes your time fly? Shut your ears from the sirens of conventional success and embrace your heart. You all have unique talents. Honour and cherish them. Your success is born here. This is where your brilliance will blossom. This is where your true fortune lies.

But beware! Excellence in all that you choose to do in life is not a road race. It's a marathon! It's an endurance race. It will demand vast resources of energy from your body, your soul and spirit. And the reserves are accumulated only through continued practice. It demands pure loyalty to the target you have set even if this is invisible and kilometres away in the far distance. There are no shortcuts. Every centimetre demands your fullest attention. Every kilometre wants you to give your utmost from what you have and more so from what you don't have. It demands strict self-discipline in order to keep to your pace on uphill as well as downhill. To open up to your emotions, but your will must prevail. You need a strong dose of self-knowledge to stay on your course even if you believe that you have run out of strength. And it doesn't matter if others finished ahead of you because you have journeyed on your own unique path, you have faced your demons, battled your own storms and you have won!

I could not even think of these and so many other wonderful gifts when I first started running. It was just a way out from the race towards a slow death. Stress kills. Smoking even more so and

more effectively too. I used to work for eighteen hours a day accompanied by eighty killer cigarettes. I used to wake up to smoke. Went up some steps and lost my breath. Until the day that I saw that this was not the only path for me. I had a choice. I chose life. Today, I cannot even imagine my life without running. Actually, I can imagine it but I don't like it.

And you know what? Running is not just a sport. It's a lesson in life. You might find some of the lessons I am sharing with you today as interesting, practical even.

When the road climbs up a hill, you don't look for the summit. You just wander your eyes down to the ground. That's it! You don't care how long and how steep that slope might be. You just turn your focus on your paces ahead. And suddenly, as if by magic, that climb disappears and the road flattens out. There is only an uphill when you compare it to where you are today. Just as everything in life, these are all tricks of the mind. Try it. The next time you will be facing an obstacle in your life, just forget about its size. Simply try and prepare your next step. Do it a step at a time and you will be able to conquer any challenge or mountain that comes your way.

Ah! One more thing about those slopes. Your legs will hurt, they will tire. This is where the help will come from a forgotten friend, your hands. If you hold them tightly to your body then the legs are left all alone, heavy and unbearable. But if your hands start to move with greater vitality, they will transmit your pulse to the rest of your body. Suddenly, your legs will discover new strength and energy. A truly wonderful symbolism that reminds me of two powerful values in life – friendship and integrity. In the first marathon that I ran, the classic race in Athens, the pain in my knees after the 30th kilometre was unbearable. As if somebody pierced needles in each step I took. Six thousand more needles to the finish line would have been impossible for me to endure had it not been for the encouragement and support from three dear friends. They could have raced ahead. But we all finished together, hand in hand. One of the most moving moments in my life. Choose your friends carefully and without any motive but that of love and acceptance. Friends give us strength in our challenges and meaning to our joys.

And the second value? Integrity. In everyday life I check myself to see if my actions and my attitude agree with my values. I don't care about the Paradise of tomorrow. I seek out the good life today, with no qualms, no compromises.

All runners, especially in a marathon, talk of the so called "wall". This hits you at the thirtieth kilometre. You are devoid of energy. Millions of ants picking at your body, your legs are like lead, your lungs are on fire and a voice from within screams out "stop, I can't take this any more." The voice of self preservation tells you to surrender. But another voice wants to be heard too. That of will-power. But in order to be able to hear that voice, you must have controlled it many times before. It will tell you to go on, don't stop, one more step, and then the next one, until your mind is calm and the exercised body takes over with its fantastic strength. And the wall starts to crumble, it disappears. That is where you discover that your mind has been programmed to hang on

to the edge of your limits. This is not our own limit. We inherited it from the training in our family, at school and in society. In your journey, you will find many more such walls. How you can overcome them depends on the strength of your will.

Some say that their scale is from one to ten or from here to there. But I wonder why we should have a scale with limits. Why should we have a scale at all? Why compare ourselves to anyone else or any project to anything else? I have allowed myself the right to be free of the experiences of others or even of my own. I have allowed myself the right to do everything as if I am doing it for the first time.

And one more thing. From the moment that you decide to run in your life marathon, don't expect a standing ovation.

When in the period that followed the stock market boom and bust I declared that I wanted to expand my business ventures beyond Cyprus, some frowned at the idea, naively. And when I said I would venture into the European energy sector they smiled, obligingly. Today, the most recent development in this venture is the addition of four new hydroelectric power stations in south east Europe that will be connected to the European energy grid. When I said that we should find practical ways to help the Greeks in northern Ypeiros, I was told that the borders are controlled and it would be easier to support a local charity in Greece. Eventually, the train of donkeys that were laden with all sorts of supplies crossed the iron fence three times. When five years ago I said I would run in a marathon race, some friends looked at me strangely and gently said nothing. Now, after three races, whenever I tell them that I will run in a marathon, even to the North Pole, they all ask "when?" And when I say that I am working hard to turn Cyprus into an energy bridge between Europe and Asia with the longest ever undersea cable, dropping to the greatest depth and carrying the biggest capacity ever in the world, even those who are distrustful are waiting to see the next step. If you challenge something that is beyond reach, you will surprise many people because we, in our human nature, prefer the security of something which is familiar. And then we will label you as "strange" and "crazy". Actually, you should be happy if you are called "strange"; this should be an honor as it is a word that competes in significance with "person". Go ahead! We need to follow your path, your journey.

Dear friends. You are graduating and you have no guarantee of professional security. The public sector is not hiring. Nor is the next most attractive employer, the semi government sector. Not even the banks. Salaries are low and stagnant.

Wonderful!

So, you don't owe anything to any of us in order to place you somewhere nice. You will need to stand on your own two feet, search deep within you to see what excites your own imagination,

what drives your curiosity and what will lead you to your own path. Your own journey of excellence. At home and abroad.

Dear graduates. Life is short and unpredictable. I realized this when I was a teenager. My mother, a kind hearted and soft spoken person asked me on the 11th of August in 1985 to hug her and kiss her on her cheeks, in front of so many others. The young person that I was, I felt embarrassed and pushed her away. Little did I know that that would be the last time I would see her. Three days later, my mother passed away. There was no "next time". Life is short. Too short to postpone living it to the fullest, here and now, just as we want it to be. Too short not to cry and laugh, now. Too short not to embrace, to kiss, to love, now! Too short not to work with passion and play with passion, now.

Be, stay strange and be curious.

Thank you.