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DECEMBER 13, 2019

¡Felicidades a la clase de 2019!
¿Cuántas familias hispanas están representadas aquí? ¡Enhorabuena a todos!

Congratulations to you all in whatever language you speak. Today we all speak Spartan. Thank you, President Vaughn, Provost Stern, Board of Trustees, university administration, distinguished guests, all my *compadres* and *comadres* on the faculty and staff at the University of Tampa, parents, family and friends of the class of 2019. But most of all, thank you students, from the bottom of my heart, for *almost never* making me regret my decision to dedicate my professional life to teaching you about the things I love. Please know that I have learned as much from you over the years as I hope you have learned during your time here. And finally, thank you Sara for that lovely introduction. Grazie mille.

I never thought I'd be asked to give a speech of this sort; you know, the kind of speech designed to inspire you, to encourage you, to make you and your family here in attendance feel that the enormous sacrifice and expense of earning a quality university education was worth it (it was!), to exhort you to follow your dreams wherever they may take you, and to challenge you to be the best that you can be, to put others before yourself, to leave the world a kinder, cleaner, more just place than you found it.

And now that I've gotten that out of the way, I'd like to briefly tell you a little something about my hero, José Martí. José Martí is an important figure in history, a revolutionary leader who united Cubans in its war for independence against Spain, an unbelievably gifted writer, and an important chronicler of the United States in the Gilded Age. He's beloved here in Tampa. Some of you might have stumbled past his statue in Ybor City once or twice in the wee hours of the morning, but we won't get into that. It was here, among the immigrant cigar workers who helped create this city, that Martí discovered the social model for the kind of nation he wanted to create. A nation that would have as its first constitutional principle what Martí called "the radical respect for the dignity of man," dedicated to "freedom of thought, equality of treatment, and peaceful labor," "with all and for the good of all." Martí lived as an exiled immigrant in the United States for 15 years, mainly in New York City, during a period when the U.S. was becoming a world power, at the dawn of what would become the American century. And while Martí admired many things about our country, he also witnessed how such rapid technological progress was exacerbating deep divisions in our society: economic divisions; racial divisions; class divisions; ideological divisions.

The United States that Martí describes in those years holds many parallels with our own. Because what Martí saw around him was a world where the old ways and the old role models had been discredited, discarded, "disrupted" I guess you would say in current parlance, but where the new

ideals, the new norms and the new role models had yet to be fashioned. Martí, like you, came of age in a rapidly changing world –a world of frightening prospects but also of unimaginable potential. As a man who made his living primarily as a journalist, he worried about what he called the “decentralization of intelligence,” in which, ironically, the proliferation of mass media was serving not to unite society, but rather to reinforce our differences and create echo chambers in the service of powerful interests instead of the truth. I’ve often imagined how he would react in the age of twitter and fake news, of state-sponsored misinformation and the proliferation of conspiracy theories?

But I think I know how he would react. Martí said there were two kinds of people: those who hate and destroy, and those who love and create. And of his tumultuous and divided age he said “this is a time for love, even for those who hate.” What I think he means by this is that love is the creative force through which new ideals are forged, and new identities created in the merging of human communities, and new role models arise for us to emulate. Love is the force behind our desire for unity, for respect and for the necessary recognition of our intrinsic dignity as individuals. But love, as all of you here can attest to, requires sacrifice.

Martí, like you, went to college. He was kicked out of Cuba at age 17, after serving five months hard labor for inciting rebellion against the Spanish Crown. He arrived in Madrid penniless, pursued by government agents. You could say it was like his study abroad experience. Three years later he held terminal degrees in Law, Philosophy and Humanities, but he was not interested in a comfortable academic or professional career. Instead, he set out alone, without money or prospects, to travel, to enroll in the university of life, and to make real his vision of transforming the colonial slave society where he was born into a modern, pluralistic, just, egalitarian, and sovereign nation. Martí sacrificed everything to create his ideal republic, and gave his life on the battlefield at age 42 in its pursuit. And while such a nation has yet to exist anywhere on this earth, Martí’s vision and example continue to inspire people all over the world. In fact, he is more widely read now than even in his own lifetime.

You see, Martí, like his hero Ralph Waldo Emerson, believed that intellectual pursuits could only get you so far. The greatest gift a liberal arts education bestows on you is the knowledge that you are not alone, that humans since time immemorial have struggled with the same issues; and all the books and art and concepts and ideals you have been exposed to will forever provide you with an inexhaustible treasure house of models of how to understand our plight and come to terms with it. But what all that knowledge, and books and art cannot do is live for you. Martí believed that it was not enough for those fortunate enough to have received a higher education to *observe* the world, to *describe* the world, to *analyze* the world; he believed you also have an obligation to *exercise* your intelligence by acting in the world, by *creating* a world that is in accordance with your truth.

The university is a wonderful place to acquire a certain kind of knowledge; the knowledge that comes from breaking things down into their constituent parts, analyzing and calling them into question, exercising the skepticism of Reason in the pursuit of Truth. The university is a wonderful place...but it can also be a trap, a labyrinth: it promises a truth in the center of its maze, but you

have to find that truth yourself, and because it's a maze, it's easy to get lost on the way. As you probably know too well, not all who enter, leave. But you have succeeded: you made it out of this labyrinth. So, what is the truth that you found here? What truth do you carry inside you now?

Like Martí, you are entering adulthood in an age of anxiety. And make no mistake about it: no one knows what lies ahead. We are constantly bombarded with conflicting and contradictory messages all designed to manipulate and persuade us to act in certain ways, to believe in certain things, to question constantly what is real and what is fake. A university education like the one you have received at UT is fundamental to your future ability to assess information, to seek out reliable facts and distinguish between rhetoric and knowledge, but that's not enough. Hopefully, we have also helped you acquire the navigational skills you are going to need to traverse the much larger labyrinth you are about to enter: the maze of life. And the truth at the center of that maze is the only real treasure this life has to offer: You. Your true self. Not money, not status, not fame: You. The rest is merely form.

We are all called to find our own path through life, and chances are that it will surprise you where and when you least expect it. There is nothing to fear; it will reveal itself to you. So long as you do not conform and resign yourself to a preconceived notion of who you are and what you will be; so as long as you live in accordance with that truth I hope you have started to discover here, that truth that is inside of you, that truth that confers upon you the dignity of which we are all capable, but which is so often easily traded for material gain or social status. By what criteria if not your own sense of right and wrong are you going to make the choices that are going to determine the course of your life, and the life of those who touch your own?

So my only bit of advice is to convey to you Martí's lesson that it does not matter *what* you choose to do in your life, as long as what you do is *useful* to others, if what you do comes from a place of love. What you choose to do in life, which may be one thing, which may be many things, should not just be the means to an end, a way to get something else that you want, be it money, recognition, or even inner peace, whatever that is. No. What you choose to do should be how you express your values in the world through your actions. The farmer is no less than the engineer, and the cook no less than the doctor; the teacher is no less than the executive, and the artist is no less than the scientist. We express our truth not through what we do, but how we do it. No matter what you do, unless you kill puppies for a living, you should do it in a *useful* way, which is to say, in accordance with how you think the world *should be*.

And no matter what life confronts you with, always, always, always defend your dignity above all things.

The future of our country, the future of our society, your future and that of your children will depend on your ability, from this day forward, to love and to create the world of tomorrow. Let's get to work.

Now say *¡Viva!* after me:

¡Que viva la clase de 2019!

¡Viva!

¡Que viva la Universidad de Tampa!

¡Viva!

Thank you very much.