



Remarks upon the Opening of the Academic Year 2008 University American College Skopje

October 2, 2008

H.E. Ambassador Philip Reeker:

Good evening, Rector Bojadziev, Mr. Gjorgov and other distinguished guests, faculty, students, parents and family members. It is an honor to be here this evening, as my wife and I celebrate exactly one week since our arrival in Skopje.

As you probably know, I served at the U.S. Embassy here in the Republic of Macedonia in the late 1990s, and it is such a pleasure to return, to see what has remained the same and what has changed. One of the biggest changes is the great flowering of new universities, giving the people of Macedonia more options to further their education—indeed, to better explore and fulfill their full potential.

I had a chance to look at your website, and I saw that University American College Skopje is “American style, American way”—which got me thinking. Just what is an “American” education, exactly? I am the product of one, to be sure, but it’s still not an easy question to answer. And so I turned to the work of the great American philosopher and educational reformer John Dewey, originally from Vermont, Macedonia’s sister state in the United States.

Dewey said, “Education is a social process; education is growth; education is not a preparation for life but life itself.” For Dewey, the interactions between teacher and student create the student’s ability to think creatively, to think critically, which is not only the key to education, but indeed to democracy. That is, you can’t have democracy if you don’t have people who know how to think.

I have also been thinking about a wonderful American writer, David Foster Wallace, who died a few weeks ago. He had a different take on this idea. In fact, he believed that what I just told you has now become a cliché!

In a graduation speech for Kenyon College, he said, “I have come gradually to understand that the liberal-arts cliché about ‘teaching you how to think’ really means learning how to exercise some control over how and what you think. It means being conscious and aware enough to choose what you pay attention to and to choose how to construct meaning from experience. Because if you cannot exercise this kind of choice in adult life,” you will be totally lost.

He goes on to explain that if you worship money, or you worship how smart you are, or how popular you are, or you worship power, you will not be free: you will be at the command of what you worship. It is only by *paying attention* that education is life itself.

So as you move into this coming academic year, this is what I ask of you: pay attention. Students: pay attention to what your parents sacrificed so you could attend this school. Parents: pay attention to how hard your son or daughter might be struggling to understand all the nuances of a particular point, and know that the struggle is good. Professors: pay attention to all the little things that your students teach you, all the things you have forgotten and need to learn over again. Pay attention, all of you, to what is going on around you. Ask questions about what you read and what you hear. Never be afraid to ask “why?” Form your own opinions; let your voice be heard. Give back to society; think of how to serve your country, and how we can all work together for a better world.

Good luck, and thank you very much.