

**Commencement Address
Vytautas Magnus University
Faculty of Social Sciences
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Labą diena, Esu giliai dėkinga dėl man suteiktos garbės

Thank you to Rector Zigmas Lydeka,
the new Rector Prof. Juozas Augutis,
Prof. Zigmuntas Kiaupa, Chairman of the University Senate,
Dean and Professor of the Faculty of Social Sciences Jonas Ruskus,
Vice-Dean and Prof. Violeta Ivanauskiene,
Professor Daiva Kuzmickaite.

Thank you for coming to my colleagues from Klaipeda --

Congratulations to the 2015 social work graduates! who have earned a degree from this most outstanding University, which like the strong arms of Grand Duke Vytautas Magnus, now has a global reach. And congratulations to your families, who are so proud on this day and worked so hard to help you reach your shining moment here.

I cannot yet speak many words in the Lithuanian language, which is the oldest and most distinguished in the world, so thank you for listening in English, and if we have the opportunity to speak together, thank you for speaking in English.

What a remarkable honor this is... This honor is all the more meaningful because of who is bestowing it -- Your historic university – named after Grand Duke Vytautas Magnus, renowned for his commitment to religious toleration and support of learning and the arts... founded during Lithuania's first democracy in 1922 and reborn again when Sąjūdis won freedom from the Soviet oppression to promote a genuine democracy.

Thinking about all of you now starting your careers as social workers, there are two important keys to fulfillment that I will focus on: Partnership – **partnerystė** and Compassion – **atjauta**.

Partnership

Lithuanians know more deeply than many other countries how precious partnership is and how devastating it can be when one does not have partners. When I was a child our countries were separated by a horrendous Iron Curtain. At that time the Lithuanian partisans such as Juozas Lukša sought partnership and support and received none from a Europe and U.S. exhausted and decimated by war. The Lithuanian partisans fighting for democracy felt, as Jonas Vaitkus put it so well in his film, utterly alone.

We see the power of partnership in the victory of Sąjūdis over the Soviets.

In a true partnership there is mutual respect and self-determination, which as Ryan and Deci, the authors of self-determination theory point out, are ingredients of happiness for all humans. Those of you who endured the Soviet occupation know all too well how important it is for human beings to be self-determining, to prevent the captive minds wrought by totalitarian ideologies. You ask the important questions, such as that raised by Ramune Jurkuvienė, former professor at Vytautas Magnus University, when she chronicled her courageous commitment to Sąjūdis and asked, “What is freedom and what is freedom for?”

We are here together today because of the wonderful partnerships my colleagues here in Lietuva have offered me – Profs. Daiva Kuzmickaite, Violeta Ivanauskiene, Jonas Ruskus, and Nijole Liobikiene, and in Klaipeda Dr. Dalia Puidokiene, Dean Elvira Atciene, Prof. Rita Vaicekauskaite, Dr. Valdas Rimkus, and Dr. Sonate Maciulskyte.... These partnerships began long ago – when I first came to Lithuania your new democracy was 12 years old – there were still Soviet style buildings on the Lysis Alea and everyone told me about the traumas they endured at the hands of Soviet oppressors and the KGB. I was profoundly moved by the story of Sąjūdis – Lithuanians singing songs of love and freedom, and standing together on the Baltic Way, at Parliament and the TV Tower despite the threats posed by Soviet tanks murdering their colleagues. This is my 6th trip to your beautiful and brave country, and my children, of Mayan and African descent, now have friends in Lietuva!

For 14 years I have had the honor of connecting with my dear friends and colleagues and students in Lietuva, and for nine years we have been able to connect our classrooms with just a few clicks of buttons in videoconferencing – our students can facebook and blog and google and tweet and instagram and flickr and all kinds of things to build their partnerships with each other. In our joint classes on Global Social Work and Research with Profs. Ivanauskiene and Liobikiene and Ruskus, we discuss social work problems, practice, and research in our countries. We have helped over 200 students from more than 25 countries to partner with each other.

When our students learned that Lithuanian social workers started services in small villages in their own backyard, and went to the mayor saying – please fund our services, look how many people use them -- our students realized they did not have to be dependent on bureaucratized U.S. social work, and could be creative and innovate. As Professor Kuzmickaite says, because social problems and solutions have important local differences but also profound underlying commonalities, we have the experience in the classes together that we all become more aware of our human natures, and more sensitive.

Partnerships help us dream dreams we could not imagine alone. Being here, receiving this great honor, is something I could not have dreamed of. Bear with me for a moment as I share a bit of my personal struggle. When I was in college in the 1970s, it was a time when I had never seen a woman in the high academic ranks, as a Professor. With my friends we were focused on questions like – If I have a career, how can I have children? How can I have a career if my husband has a career? It was not uncommon for men to say, “I would never marry a smart woman...” and we women were accustomed to taking a back seat to the more assertive male scholars in our midst. When my teachers told me – you should be a Professor, I could not even make sense of it. It seemed they said – you should fly to Mars. Yet – here we are.

And as I was just talking about the people who were my teachers and partners I hope you are remembering the people in your lives who believed in you and helped you come to this shining moment of celebration...Please -- when you encounter the great obstacles and challenges that will rise up before you, consider that if you nurture your partnerships, you will be able to dream dreams you would never imagine now, and make those dreams come true.

Compassion

Social work is a science based on partnership. We are scientists of human nature... and of human change processes – destructive change as occurs in family violence, bullying, or societal oppressions such as the Soviet occupation; and constructive change, as occurs in social work care and movements for freedom and self-determination like Sajūdis. We engage people as partners in developing knowledge so that those who are marginalized in society can speak their truths and society has the opportunity to include them.

I learned to think about our science as a partnership with my colleagues here, Prof. Ruskus and Kuzmickaite and Ivanauskiene. As Professor Ruskus, an EU authority on participatory action research, said, the key to research is engaging people as partners so they can let us know what is most meaningful to them in their struggles, their strengths, and their relationships.

After thinking about participatory action research with my Lithuanian partners, when I went back home, I asked the most experienced social workers who supervised residential

care for seriously mentally ill and substance abusing clients – what capabilities do you need the most to do this difficult work?

And we asked the disadvantaged children and youth who were our clients on the South Side of Chicago – what means the most to you as you participate in social services?

Both social workers and clients said compassion - **atjauta**.

What participants told us was like an x-ray into how our compassion works deep in our minds

The youth we interviewed live in the most impoverished communities in Chicago. Every one of them knew someone who had been killed in the community violence that rages there. Some had no winter coats and many spent days hungry. All of them wondered how they would escape the grinding poverty and jail time they saw crippling their elders. We asked them what aspects of our services they found most fulfilling, and they said they loved caring for community children.

Even those who had received very little could describe giving compassion to someone. One young man said, “I played with the child I was helping because I knew how painful it was when no one played with me.”

We learned that at the core of our being, where our compassion resides, we have within us a moral compass. When injustice happens on a societal level, people feel deep outrage and that inner moral compass has nowhere to turn for affirmation. A moral abyss results in the person. The young people told us that the compassion of their social workers is a means to bring about a cure and help each person connect with their own inner strengths.

Inside you your Compassion alerts you to what another person suffers and lets you know your comfort will help – even if you cannot alleviate all the suffering, your comfort will at least alleviate the terrible pain of feeling utterly alone like the partisans of so long ago. Our clients told us that receiving compassion is what leads to hope – a grounded, humane path to a better future.

Often compassion can be mistakenly associated with weakness. People may choose not to act on their compassion out of fear of ridicule or of being duped. We learned from the youth that acting on compassion takes courage. A young woman – we can call her Shaniqua -- told us about why acting on her compassion became so important to her. A girl in her school was being mercilessly bullied. Shaniqua did not come to her aid because she feared being ridiculed. Shortly later, the girl killed herself. Shaniqua said – “maybe if I had helped her she would not have felt so alone and she would not have killed herself. That is why I decided I have to always act on my compassion – it can save lives.”

Let’s not forget the importance of your compassion for yourself. You’ll have moments you’ll feel like you’ve failed; or you’ll triumph in a difficult client situation and no one will appreciate it; or you’ll have to stand up for your values and find yourself rejected by people you thought would stand with you. You need to give yourself compassion too, and

seek out people who will buoy you up when you feel you might lose the passion for caring and justice that is your guiding light.

Conclusion

Even though your country is free of the Soviet Iron Curtain, there are other destructive forces, or Iron Curtains, that social workers in all countries confront and you will too: Corruption and unethical practices even among social workers; Human cruelty; discrimination and prejudice. More than most peoples, you know how high the stakes are in trying to establish a true democracy in a capitalist context. If the Iron Curtains of social inequalities and indifference dominate your society, the stage is set for the disorder and violence that in the past led to the extremisms of Nazism and the Soviet state; in the present, those Iron Curtains make people vulnerable to being recruited by violent groups such as the gangs in the poverty-ridden neighborhoods of Chicago, or, on the world stage, Isis and similar terrorist organizations. People without hope and self-determination cling to destructive illusions, and force those Iron Curtains on others, destroying a society's freedoms.

Just as your parents effectively resisted the Soviet Iron Curtain with their partnerships and compassion, you will too. In the many statues of Ruben Troiles, on the Witches Hill in Neringa or the Hill of Crosses in Siauliai, we see a people who can prevail, despite terrible griefs, through partnership and shared compassion. You will stand in partnership with disadvantaged, marginalized persons. You will tell the powerful and wealthy that our humanity and fulfillment depend on embracing persons who are poor, disabled, or oppressed. You will prevail in the life of every person you touch.

In the 21st century, partnerships can flourish despite the barriers of distance, language, and time -- Let your partnerships cross barriers and flourish.
Treasure your compassion and choose to live it out as best you can
and know you have partners in the US who will welcome and affirm you --

Labai Jums ačiū, tebūnie partnerystė ir atjauta (Let there be partnership and compassion).