

# ON THE IMPORTANCE OF STUDYING OTHER LANGUAGES\*

I would like to begin this talk with a story that dates back to the days when I was about the age most of you honor society inductees are right now. It occurred when I was a Rotary exchange student in Belgium, and it was the moment when I discovered the incredible power involved in learning another language.

Belgium is a bilingual country, much like Canada, only the two major languages spoken are French and Flemish. Although I was located in the northern, Flemish part of the country, I was placed with French-speaking families and attended a French school, as my hosts felt that French would be a more useful language for me to learn. However, I was eager to learn enough Flemish to get along on the street—to ask directions, buy stamps at the post office, buy a ticket at the train station. I also found Flemish to be a charming and intriguing language in itself. So, while I was learning French at school and at home, I was also picking up as much Flemish as I could on my own.

Every week I was called on to give a speech to a different Rotary Club, since Rotary International was my sponsor. At first, I gave the speech in English, and then, as my French grew stronger, I began to give it in French. At the very first speech I was to give, in my own sponsoring club district, however, I decided that I wanted to also include a few words in Flemish. I knew that the Rotary meetings there were conducted in Flemish, and I felt it would be a gesture of goodwill. So I sat down one night with a Flemish dictionary and a pencil and paper and asked my Belgian brother to help me compose an introductory paragraph. My brother laughed at the idea of an American speaking Flemish. "When will you ever use that language again?" he wanted to know. But I was persistent, and in the end, he helped me put together and rehearse a few sentences.

When I stood up to speak after lunch at a local restaurant, I was quite nervous, but I grasped the podium with both hands and plunged ahead. After several sentences, I sensed a commotion in the room, but I was too nervous to pause. Finally, at the end of my introduction, I looked up, and I was amazed to see that everyone was on his feet, applauding. A standing ovation! And then Mr. Matthijs, the President of the club, rushed to the podium to shake my hand, and I saw that tears were literally running down his face, and there were tears in the eyes of several other Rotarians, as well.

I was absolutely astonished! Here I was, a seventeen-year-old girl, barely arrived in this country, and, simply by learning a few

words of a new language, I had brought grown businessmen to tears. And they were equally astonished—and very grateful! Here was an American who had cared enough about their little country, about their language, to bother to learn to speak a few words, even though she could have simply delivered her speech in English. Clearly, the respect and admiration we felt was mutual.

And this is when I discovered the incredible power of language to bridge cultural differences and bind people to one another. Yes, it is true that you can get along in life without speaking another language. Yes, it is true, as everyone says, that "they"—whoever they may be—usually understand English anyway. Yes, it is true that "they" do not really expect you to learn their language. However, knowing another language makes a huge difference. It goes far beyond mere communication. For one thing, people are enormously appreciative of the fact that you cared enough about them, about their culture, about their country, to take the trouble to learn to speak their language, however imperfectly. Even though they may speak very good English, people are naturally attached to their native language, because language is the heart and soul of a culture. Language is the means by which people frame their thoughts and express their own unique ways of thinking, feeling, and seeing the world. The whole life of a culture—its music, poetry, theater, art, literature—are all wrapped up in its language. We cannot truly know and understand another culture in without studying its language.

As you students of language go out into the world, you will discover there are many opportunities for language learners. First of all, there will be chances to study a second or perhaps a third language. Perhaps you will decide to take Japanese in college or Italian or German or Arabic. Perhaps you will decide to pursue the study of French at more advanced levels. If so, you will discover many opportunities for study and travel abroad, through semester abroad programs, internships, and cultural exchanges. You will have the opportunities to form lifelong friendships. On the practical side, you will discover that language learners have many career opportunities, both overseas and here at home. In the past few years in particular we have discovered the urgent need for speakers of languages such as Korean and Arabic. In the future, knowledge of other languages may be necessary for our very safety and survival, and speakers of other languages will be valued accord-

ingly.

Most importantly, language learners will have the opportunity to experience life in all its richness and diversity. Since I am a French teacher, I am delighted that so many of you are proficient in that language—the language of Baudelaire and Balzac, of Molière and Rousseau and Voltaire, the language of great thinkers and playwrights and artists and philosophers.

However, I am going to tell you something that will surprise you. As much as I love the French language, it is not the most important thing you have to learn. I think about this when I find myself standing at a chalkboard at 8 a.m. on a snowy Monday morning struggling to teach French verb conjugations to a class of restless 12 year olds. "What on earth am I doing here, and why does it matter?" are questions asked on occasion by the best of us. Then I remind myself that verb conjugations are not the most important lesson I have to teach my students. No, the most important thing we language teachers have to teach our students is to understand, appreciate, and respect individual differences.

I hope you will all find a way to go on with your foreign language study and the study of French in particular. Even if you do not, even if you never leave the U.S., even if you spend your life working in an unrelated field, the study of a foreign language will have served a very important purpose in your life. It will have opened your hearts and minds to other ways of seeing, feeling, and thinking. It will have made you sympathetic to other people's way of life and point of view, and understanding of their differences. It will have taught you to put yourself in the other person's place, to walk in his shoes. This is a very important skill in this troubled world.

Therefore, we are enormously proud of you as we celebrate your accomplishments. We are proud, not only of your accomplishments, which are considerable. We are also proud because you will be the ones who will notice when a stranger walks into the room, a little hesitant and shy and out of place, and you will be the ones to walk over and speak to that person and make him or her feel comfortable. You will be the ones to reach out and befriend the individual who is "different"—the one with a different language, or culture, or race, or religion, or physical appearance, and give yourself a chance to get to know and appreciate that person. You will be the one who will speak up when you hear another person or group denigrated simply because they are different. You will be the

ones to defend their right to be different and to argue in favor of tolerance and understanding. This is the most important reason for what we do—for this wonderful enterprise of learning which we have entered into together.

Right now the world is going through a time of tremendous crisis caused in part by the fact that whole populations and cultures fail to really know or understand each other. There is an enormous amount of fear and suspicion, of alienation and anger and real danger in the world today. It is a tense, confusing time, and it is difficult to know which of several sides is right or how it will turn out. Whatever happens, I do know this: in the long run, if we are ever to resolve these crises and live in safety and peace, there will have to be more contact between the peoples of the world, not less. There will have to be more communication on both sides, more student exchanges, more teacher exchanges, more cultural exchanges and sister city programs, more professional conferences, more trade, and more effort by good-hearted people everywhere to improve communication and understanding. This is the enormous challenge that you will face when you go out into the world. It may be hard for you to believe now, but one day, the world and all its problems will be in your hands. Looking at all of your bright, eager, capable faces, I am reassured. You have been very well-prepared by your teachers and parents and mentors, and you will be up to the challenge.

Marcia Johnson (NY)

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