2026 DINNER and AWARDS for ETHICAL LEADERSHIP

David Goldman
Chair

I have to repeat and pinch myself, maybe pinch everyone in the room (not literally): this will be the 16th year that we have been granting fellowships; with the 2026 class of Fellows we now have well over 1000 alumni. So thank you to those who have made all this happen—board members, donors, faculty, alumni, and staff.

I am proud to have been part of a constantly curious, committed, and entrepreneurial group of stakeholders. And I am proud and blessed to be part of a team led by Rebecca, Mia, and Thorsten. You make every day fun for me. Everyone in this room is indebted to you for your curiosity, your commitment, your willingness to lead this ride of always different thinking. Everyone in this room shares the great fortune that you, with our alumni, will lead us into a bright future. Special thanks, again, to the team that led the effort to make tonight happen. Mia and Mia, Kathy and Debbie. Shonni and John, Zach and Skylar, Maura, Maggie, Alicia and BJ. Debbie, you are the great producer, FASPE's and my personal Max Bialystok. I, of course, did most of the work, but I don't mind giving you all the credit.

Part of what is so much fun, so impactful, about being in the middle of FASPE is the constant internal battle: what more can we do; how else can we test the eternal conflict between curiosity and stamina! With that, I note that we are hosting two symposia each year; we are now leading ethics workshops inside many of the world's great law firms, consulting practices, and global corporates, including several in big pharma. And our own play—*Here There Are Blueberries*—opens on Broadway tonight! Come see our talkbacks after many of the shows.

I hear a constant comment about FASPE: "you are more necessary than ever." But why?

Yes, I understand: we are more necessary now than ever because of the risks of the seemingly unprecedented confluence of existential issues: unbridled nationalism that is founded on racism, misogyny, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and more; environmental threats that will feed the nationalism as climate change drives immigration from south to north; growing economic disparities; artificial intelligence.

But I want to talk tonight about what I believe is the real challenge that we must confront. What explains why FASPE is the answer: We suffer from a failure of character. That is the FASPE throughline.

We worry that machines have no humility, that machines don't think about ethics, don't practice virtue. Well, I propose that our problem today is that our leaders, our professionals, that we, suffer from a lack of humility, a disinterest in virtue. We are the problem; and that problem begins with a failure in education and training.

There is historical precedent.

In 1917 a group of graduate students in Germany invited the renowned sociologist Max Weber to address what they saw as a dangerous focus on what they described as "technical knowledge" as opposed to what they acknowledged as "virtue ethics." Weber's answer bemoaned that reality: "Precisely," he said, "the ultimate and most sublime values have retreated from public life."

Let me describe it differently: a few years ago Pawel Sawicki, whom many of you have met—our lead educator at Auschwitz—began a visit of our Fellows, while standing under the *arbeit macht frei gate,* by saying, "The story of Auschwitz is not the story of hate, it is not the story of murder, it is not a story of antisemitism; it is a story of problem-solving. Normal people solving everyday problems. Every day.

And isn't that what we suffer from today? When do we pause and ask ourselves: what are we doing and why? One of our alumni described FASPE as an effort to promote *virtue*, not *virtuosity*. Character, not technical knowledge. Humility and empathy, not mere problem-solving.

Yes, the failure of education and training in 1917 Germany led to 1933. And we are seeing in 2026 the failure of education and training in the past quarter century.

We have lawyers who are trained to win, not to seek truth; we have technologists who worship at the altar of effective algorithms without the humility to explore the consequences; we have professionals promoting lies and conspiracy theories without regard to resulting distrust in all professionals; we have medical professionals who have ceded bedside decision-making to C-suite and private equity financiers; we have pastors of all religions who have privileged single-issue political zealotry as if grounded in scripture. We have business executives who wouldn't recognize empathy unless it can be cynically claimed as part of a digital marketing campaign. We are really good at what we do, but we lack character.

Our professionals complain about the lack of trust. Well, how about all of us professionals look in the mirror and ask whether we are trustworthy!

So, what is FASPE? FASPE teaches character. FASPE does not answer ethical questions; we are not the ethics police. Instead, we demand vigilant self-awareness to recognize our own vulnerability to act badly.

How are we relating to other people as human beings? With humility, I do think that what we are uniquely teaching is needed now more than ever. Thank you in this room and beyond for your partnership in all that we do.

We are honoring three people today who embody character. That is the throughline of the honorees; I propose it as the throughline of the evening. Others will speak about Fred Marino and Vardit Ravitsky. I only note that in my dictionary, when I look up "character," there is a picture of Fred. And, everything that Vardit writes, and how she leads, represents character.

But, I have the task of introducing Jordyn Holman. This is always my favorite moment of our dinners. Honoring our Distinguished Fellow. [Well, my favorite moment is actually when I'm done speaking and I can finally have my third glass of wine]. I live in the past. When I think of journalists, I see Ben Bradlee (actually Jason Robards). Walter Cronkite. Tom Wicker. Seymour Hirsch. Maybe Hunter Thompson, but that's another matter.

But who will become the great journalists of this generation? Rather than merely recite Jordyn's degrees and honors, I suggest that all of you, if you have not already, read Jordyn's "Corner Office" column in The New York Times; her choices—who to interview, what questions to ask, her willingness to challenge—reflect what we need today: a combination of truth, honesty, and a commitment to ethical journalism, all with a clear understanding that we are a diverse society that demands more than unexamined facts. Jordyn, I am so proud to be your friend, I am so pleased to be the one to recognize you tonight.