

Parkland College Commencement Address

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Krannert Art Center

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President Ramage, members of the Parkland College community, the graduating class of 2010, and parents, families, and friends, I am deeply honored to speak to you today.

I congratulate the graduating students on their accomplishments – which open up new windows of challenges and opportunities.

In my time with you, I will be talking about some of these challenges that we face at the global level, and the opportunities they present in seeking and pursuing a higher purpose.

To add to the earlier generous introduction of myself, I study how people who are poor and have low literacy, function in the marketplace as consumers and as entrepreneurs.

My work is mainly in the United States and in India.

I take what we learn *back* to some of these communities through educational programs.

And I bring back what I learn from them into the curriculum and the classroom at the University of Illinois.

Students in one of my courses travel across the world to learn about a different culture... and design sustainable solutions for people living in poverty.

My work is at the intersection of subsistence and sustainability.

I should note that, although I study poverty, I have never been poor and I do not have any specialized expertise on the environment.

But I speak about these two issues today, as I strongly believe that they will be among the biggest global challenges of our lifetimes.

I also used a word that can mean a lot of things - sustainability.

What does this word mean to me?

Very simply, am I living in a way that is taking away from your chances of a better future?

Can I look my 15 year old in the eye, can I look a young person in this audience in the eye, and say - I am living in a way that is NOT taking away from your chances of a better future?

Unfortunately, with all the information coming at me, I simply cannot look you in the eye because we are on an unsustainable path.

We are living off the principal, and not just the interest from the natural resources we have inherited.

I say this because of a variety of trends in the last few decades - from pollution to depletion of natural resources to population growth, acidification of oceans, soil erosion and changes to the climate; not any single issue, but as a collection of information coming at us.

And there is only one phrase to describe the last few decades - they have been off the charts!

My conclusion is extremely strong and comes with a feeling of great urgency - that business as usual simply will not cut it.

Let us take population growth for example.

In what is approximately a natural life span, the population of the world has gone from 3 billion a few decades ago, to about 6.6 billion today, and is estimated to reach 9 billion in a few decades.

Many of the people being added to the world will be poor - trying to survive, and make it out of poverty.

This is a collision course we are on, in having the capacity for basic necessities, like drinking water.

And then how many earths will it take in terms of resources to meet the wants and aspirations of the poor around the world that are just as worthy and deserving as my own.

We are on another collision course as well in terms of environmental degradation and disaster.

This comes home to me in studying poverty because, for the poor, environmental issues are often very local - not something they can compartmentalize and postpone thinking about for the moment.

Using and disposing plastic bags means blocked sewage means disease.

The resource constraints that are reaching more advanced economies have been a reality in impoverished communities.

My emphasis on the environment is not to take away from the amazing progress we have seen in the last centuries through technological advances - improving the quality of life in so many arenas.

It is that we should be listening to what nature is telling us about the path we are on, and change course, steer the large ship of progress, direct it differently, so a good future remains for generations to come.

We have become highly sophisticated and advanced in our ability to gratify our needs - in the very next instant.

With my Blackberry, I have at my fingertips, the ability to check the weather across the world, make a reservation for dinner at a restaurant, read commencement speeches made by others and text my son and expect an immediate response.

Now, no matter what the instant technology, whether I get a response from my son or not is, of course, a different issue.

However, the problem of the environment and what nature is telling us in terms of the course we are on requires a very different mindset.

The onset of environmental problems is over many decades.

And the measures we take will only pay dividends in the distant future – very different from our current mindset of satisfying needs immediately.

Now why should we care?

Because these two challenges of poverty and the environment highlight how interconnected we all are, across the world.

Although environmental problems will have a disproportionate impact on the most vulnerable among us, it will have significant impact on everyone.

Pollution travels, resources are getting depleted for all of us, giant garbage patches in oceans affect everyone.

And poverty at home and abroad is intertwined with our lives.

We can select a few products used everyday and see how many are made or grown by impoverished producers - like the farmer who grows the coffee we drink at the corner shop, whose well-being is connected with ours.

In turn, these challenges mean opportunities to make an impact to envision a better world and to work toward it.

It means sustainable ways of living, innovative designs of products, new types of enterprises, and above all, different mindsets and ways of thinking.

As an example of an innovative product design, the first time I applied the brakes when driving a hybrid car, the display showed the battery being charged and the maximum mileage possible.

This surprised me – that we could actually be using the energy from braking – made possible by having a rechargeable storage device on board.

Why was it surprising?

Because it seems that we have been designing products... assuming we *can* afford to waste resources.

But this design was based on the assumption that we *cannot* afford to waste resources.

How novel is that?

Speaking of enterprises - why cannot more businesses address multiple bottom lines – do well and do good?

Some of the most interesting enterprises around the world blend economic goals with social and environmental goals.

Rather than separate profit from social good, and give back later on, why not blend multiple goals into the way we run our businesses.

Addressing these global challenges means using our learning to solve problems across the world.

But it also means learning from others and having a truly global mindset.

And we can learn from the most unlikely of places.

As one example, cell phones are very popular among the poor in many countries.

For somebody who is poor, a cellphone can be a lifeline, say, to call a doctor from a village in the middle of the night and find out what to do for a sick child.

Wireless communication leapfrogs the need to have infrastructure for landlines.

Cell phones are inexpensive, sometimes costing as little as 30 dollars, and durable in high temperatures and dust.

Customers can buy a few minutes of talk time - there is no need to sign up for 2 year plans.

Incoming calls are free and so "*missed call*" is a verb.

“I will “*missed call*” you when I get home” is a grammatically correct sentence.

Poor entrepreneurs close deals with the number of rings before hanging up – for instance, one ring could mean I don’t like your price, two rings - it’s a deal.

There is a lot we can learn from these product and service innovations and from the adaptivity of these consumers and entrepreneurs.

Addressing challenges in an interconnected world, also means understanding cultural differences.

All the sustainable technologies may have little impact unless they are designed with deep understanding of cultural issues and differences.

To solve the collective challenges we face, we need large scale adoption of sustainable methods.

But billions of people struggling for their next meal are not waiting in line to adopt what we think are sustainable solutions.

Why should they, when I, with all the resources at my disposal am willing to change *so little* in my own behavior.

So the solutions we develop have to be based on a deep understanding of cultures.

What does all this mean to you as individuals as you seek and pursue a higher purpose.

The challenges we face and the opportunities they present call for developing a meaningful purpose to work toward a better world.

Developing purpose requires active effort, to understand what drives you and what opportunities are out there
– to look inward and outward.

Write a short statement for every direction you consider taking about what interests you and why, or what does not and why not.

Write about what you would do if you pursued a direction – put your thoughts down on paper rather than leave them as thoughts so you can see what you are thinking more clearly.

Finding purpose is a little bit like being at a junction with roads leading in many directions.

You may need to go down a few roads for a short distance before you decide.

Or you may decide to create a path where none exists.

And this is not something you will do once or twice in life but again and again.

If you know who you are and what you are passionate about and find a match with what is out there,

you are likely to be very happy because you can count on the intrinsic rewards.

So follow your heart and your imagination in developing purpose, but let your mind contemplate the journey ahead.

Be idealistic in setting your goals but be practical in how you reach them.

Be clear and firm in where you want to go, but be flexible in how you get there.

To borrow from a much-used metaphor, progress toward your goals may not look like a constant march but perhaps more like a flowing river, sometimes seeming to flow sideways or even in reverse, around obstacles, but slowly, steadily forward.

In developing and pursuing your purpose, inform yourself.

In fact, ethics and professional responsibility begin with informing ourselves particularly when we are capable of being informed through the education we have received.

I paraphrase from a famous quote – we are entitled to our own opinions but not to our own facts.

So form opinions after you have discerned the facts, and allow new facts to change your opinions.

Build your larger vision or purpose into what you do and the way you do it.

Too often, when we hear about something unethical, illegal, wrong - we hear that somebody was just doing their job, or it was just business.

To the extent possible – let us not separate what we give back to society from what we do everyday.

Instead of waiting to give back, would it not be so much more powerful if we folded higher purpose into the job we do, or the enterprise we run, and the way we do things everyday?

Why not give as we take, and give back later as well?

How you go about your purpose is very important.

So persist with your purpose, but do so by setting an example and showing impact through your work.

But don't dwell on what you do in comparison with others.

People do good in their own ways and none of us has all the answers.

Whatever your purpose, never compromise on quality – if your name is associated with something, it has to be of good quality or better.

Yes, you will balance many things in life.

But what you control are the commitments you make and how you prioritize them.

Quality applies to the way you communicate your work as well - if you don't communicate your work effectively, no one else will.

You simply cannot say that you do good work but it is not reflected in the way you communicate.

In fact, if you have really understood your own work, you have also understood how best to communicate it.

Let me give you an example, and I apologize for being self-serving.

I wrote a book on research methods in the social sciences published five years ago.

My challenge to my students is very simple – for each error of any sort they find in the book, I will give them a hundred dollars.

No one has collected yet.

Do I see a rush to the exits and the library, as I speak?

This is not to say there are no mistakes in the book but just that I tried.

Sincere mistakes are a part of trying hard and we have to work through them in the marathon called life.

To conclude, I believe events or journeys, big or small, ... involve four elements –

preparation, purpose, perseverance, and perpetuation.

Think about a memorable get-together you had with your family, or a volunteer activity in your community.

It involved preparation.

It involved purpose - to be in the moment and enjoy the occasion.

It involved everyone persevering to make it happen.

And it perpetuated good feelings that lasted beyond the occasion.

Your preparation has come, in large part, from the education you have received.

Purpose comes from looking inward, into the reservoirs of your heart, your mind and your imagination, and outward, at the challenges and opportunities around you, both local and global.

As you persevere in the foreseeable future, your work will perpetuate real, positive change in people's lives and in our global society.

I congratulate you for your accomplishments and wish you the very best for a wonderful career and life.

Thank you for listening and for giving me the great honor of speaking to you on this very special occasion.