

DUSP Commencement Lunch 2-June-10

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Thank you very much. I want to begin by congratulating the Class of 2010 and thanking you, the students, for inviting me to be a part of your graduation. I have always felt that while the university appoints us as “professors,” it’s our students who make us *educators*, and knowing that you had many wonderful choices for your graduation speaker, it means a great deal to me that you wanted me here in that role.

Now, I had the unique task of welcoming many of you, particularly students in the Master’s program, and teaching and advising you, on the front end of your journey at MIT. Though some of you may have blocked out those early days, my recollection is that I tried hard to deprive you of straightforward answers – narrow definitions of “planners” and of “planning,” for example – in order to push you to ask impertinent questions, of yourselves and others, and to explore the possibilities of your professional lives, and your own assumptions about what is worth doing in the world and why and how.

For all these reasons, it’s a great treat to be here to mark this transition with my former students. To everyone else, please know that I’m going to say so much about crisis,

ambiguity, personal courage, and risk taking over the next fifteen minutes that you may well be grateful that I was never your professor. That's the aim, at any rate, since I wouldn't want anyone feeling left out.

Let's start with *crisis*. I'm not sure why it's so much on my mind lately. It could be the things that have filled my latest weeks at work—the ecological and economic disaster that is the Deepwater oil spill, the very public debate over immigration reform and security on the Southwest border, the great anxiety felt by millions of jobless workers—here and in other parts of the globe—who are still reeling from the effects of the massive financial crisis, which became an body blow to the “real” economy in so many communities.

Or perhaps it's simply the sense that there's a basic tension between the sustained effort that our biggest challenges require—climate change, human rights, economic reform, and more—a real tension between that sustained and patient effort and the short attention spans and short-run performance demands of our political life and ever-changing media culture.

Crises put that tension in sharp relief.

Crisis management is, I realize, not the storybook version of policy analysis at the senior levels of public service, though it is fairly close to the picture of decision-making realities I have long tried to convey to my students, especially where communication is concerned: *Given all the things competing for attention, all the room for confusion and distraction, in your writing, present simply and clearly, get to the point quickly, defend your arguments. In your oral and visual arguments, the same: Take the listener's perspective, outline the problem in terms of what the listener or viewer most needs to learn and the steps through which they can learn it. And so on. Be deliberate about making reason and rationality accessible to people who need it but struggle to make meaningful use of it.*

And I rely heavily on the people who work with me, including an extraordinary staff that includes many career public servants, to play by those rules. That and very healthy quantities of late-night chocolate. Plus, I do yoga in my office. I will not be demonstrating that here, you'll have to take my word.

I try to play by those rules, too, trimming away many of the nuances we academics are bred to write about at length in favor of the simple questions or observations that I think will

most help the people around me to understand better and to be more effective.

If I'm honest with myself, some of the most useful things I say and do come in the form of one or two-sentence emails or hallway exchanges, and some of them concern billions of dollars and other hugely important stakes. I try to remember not only to mean what I say—in the sense that I should be prepared to defend it, to the President and others if need be—but also to make everything I say count.

On that score and others, my planning practice is a work in progress—and always will be.

Candidly, most days in The White House, I feel like a short-order cook who is working in a fancy diner. And it's a diner that happens to be on fire.

It is, as they say, an environment rich in “forcing events”—events that compel you to decide and to act, accepting the risks that come with that. But more to the point of this ceremony, it is an environment rich in opportunities for planners, in the broad sense that we have used the term, here at MIT, for more than a generation now.

Environments defined by crises—and if past is prologue, you will all face many of them over the course of your careers—they remind you, each and every day, how vital it is to combine a relentlessness about analytic problem-solving with the emotional resources that make real, lasting change possible. In simpler terms, those kinds of environments remind you of the need to be “all in,” with both the head and the heart.

That includes, I think, striking a balance between, on one hand, the healthy confidence and even the *brio* or *chutzpah* that says, “I can do that faster, I can push that idea farther, I can invent a better mousetrap” and on the other hand, the humility and generosity that encourages others to flourish, to find the best in themselves, and to know that they’re not crazy for asking skeptical questions or suggesting alternative paths.

It’s not one or the other. It’s not about turning yourself into a scribe who merely validates everyone else’s contributions. But nor is it expecting that the genius of your ideas will be self-evident to all concerned, without translation or without discussion.

It’s the balance that lets us strive to continuously reinvent the world, as well-meaning experts are wont to do, at the

same time that we make it possible for others to join us in that reinvention rather than merely look on, with fear and resentment, and look for ways to tear down the things we are so eager to create or propose creating.

Kipling had a pointed rendering of these challenges, which crises present so acutely, and he expressed it as the first half of a condition: “If you can keep your head when all about you are losing theirs and blaming it on you ...”

Thankfully, that pattern does not define my current workplace. I’m lucky enough to work among creative, smart, incredibly team-spirited people. A wonder really, given the sharp elbows for which White House staffs are famous. No, it’s the wider world—a world full of crisis and possibility—that I’m thinking of when I quote Kipling.

That line of verse describes our propensity – as a species – to react too often with panic and blame when we most need to act like grown-ups who have a measure of faith in each other and commitment to each other.

For the professional, and for young professionals in particular, not losing one’s head seems like good advice right about now. Understanding other people’s pride and dignity is surely a part of the recipe, too.

Kipling had some advice here, and it's especially apt for those pursuing an expert craft like planning: "Don't give way to hating," he wrote, "and yet don't look too good nor talk too wise."

For the other half of the condition, by the way, Kipling promised "The Earth and everything that's in it." Not a bad deal—but admittedly a rather figurative and far-off one.

He also offered something more immediate, a kind of recognition—that anyone who can find this tricky balance I've been talking about, and find it even in crises or especially then, has earned a certain standing.

It is a standing that comes from being a mature *member of society*, in the fullest sense of membership. I think that means finding creative ways to contribute as citizens, through our work, and not merely to produce things as professionals who are competent at our work. Being productive in the narrow sense is a means to an end, not an end in itself, as too many people seem to discover the hard way, in the middle or the twilight of their careers.

For these reasons, I hope, first and foremost, that MIT has added to both your confidence and your humility, and that you see no contradiction in that at all.

And I wish you balance, not in the sense of being halfway restless or somewhat passionate about things, but in the sense of keeping your head in crises, most of all when others can't or won't do the same.

I also hope that you won't rush toward every crisis but that you won't shrink from handling your share either. *To use a baseball metaphor, the world needs people who love to play, and even live to play, in the bottom of the ninth.* I think this room is full of such people.

Having said all that, what kind of course should we chart collectively, in the years ahead? That is, what is the larger effort of which you should want, as planners, to be a part?

It is simply this, I think, and there is nothing profound in this outline: to make the world's communities more beautiful, livable, sustainable, prosperous and just.

Make them more *beautiful* because the way we imprint meaning on the world around us, delight the eye, and move the spirit—beyond the functional basics of mobility, shelter,

and services—is by creating or protecting the things that would otherwise be lost—or fighting for the things that would never be created at all but for someone daring to ask and to advocate. So I hope you will dare to do both, early and often.

Next, we need to make communities more *livable* because in almost every corner of the globe, changing populations, with changing conceptions of health and well-being, are looking for new physical forms and functions in cities to meet their needs across the life course. As faculty, staff and students here at DUSP know well, it's our institutions and public expectations that have a hard time keeping up with the forms that planners are imagining and helping to create. And it's a core premise here at MIT that planners should redefine those boundaries rather than timidly heed them.

Third, let's not relent in the cause to make communities more environmentally *sustainable*, because the climate crisis, growing energy demands, water scarcity, pollution and other threats make it an imperative. In this global project, planners are uniquely positioned to invent better alternatives, build constituencies for change, forge agreements—many agreements will be imperfect but vital nonetheless—to do all these essential things and also get the details of implementation right, long after attention has

moved on to the next big idea or the always-sought-after easy way out.

We must make communities more *prosperous*, because the economic crisis has shown how structurally out of balance things have been for so long, with too much development in new communities fueled by easy and excessive borrowing, too few hard choices made to help reinvigorate older cities—some of which we are only starting to re-imagine beyond their industrial-age forms—plus too many trade imbalances that were unsustainable, too little transparency and oversight in the financial markets that communities everywhere depend on, too much predatory marketing of harmful financial products.

And following that last point, we must make communities more *just*, because in some parts of the globe, access to the most basic human rights remains insecure, while in other parts, it is access to security itself, along with opportunity, that is so unequal.

Over the past decade, the science has become strikingly clear, for example, that children born into high poverty, high crime neighborhoods begin school at a huge disadvantage, not only because they face direct physical risks and material deprivation throughout their young lives or have fewer at-

home learning resources—such as well-educated parents who make it a regular habit to read to them—but because even by the age of five, the chronic stresses associated with poverty have impaired their memories and the ability to learn. That is, the inequality that is so great in many of our greatest cities actually impairs brain function for the children most likely to lack affordable and stable housing, safe streets and safe places to play, stimulating early childhood education, primary healthcare, and other essentials.

Place matters in part because dangerous places affect the brain so profoundly and, through it, everything that is possible for the rest of our lives.

As my collaborators and I have found in the Moving to Opportunity experiment, well-run housing or public safety programs, or savvy combinations of the two, can help to expand *freedom from fear*, with big, positive effects on staggering levels of anxiety and depression, which would cripple most of us if we faced those risks every day. On this front, too, planners tend to bring a unique grasp of how systems that dysfunction can be made to function. They are less likely than other professionals, I find, to look at these issues through the proverbial straw, applying relevant but narrow insights to solve small pieces of the problem.

From where I sit, this is no mere wish list. It is an incredibly urgent set of tasks. It is why you came here to learn and why I came here to teach—and to keep learning while teaching.

Not to set the bar too high, but I expect you, collectively, to move the needle on several of the biggest challenges of our age. Why should you aim lower than that, and why shouldn't I ask that?

The comedian Jon Stewart is fond of saying that his generation made a big mess just in time for the next generation to clean it up. But my generation is bequeathing a few things, too. Like the rock band U2. They're on loan from my generation to yours. So I'm asking, in return, for you to make a significant difference—in the beauty, sustainability and justice of the world.

I'm asking that of you as a group. No need to make it your personal, Napoleonic project. You'll drive yourself crazy, and except for moments of true panic, the world no longer welcomes Napoleons.

No, all I'm asking is that you be the courageous, reflective, confident, humble and relentless planners you came here determined to be. I'm reminding you of the things you knew

about on entry and pointing out a few more that may have been less obvious.

Most importantly, this: *you* are planning, you are all that you have inherited—from the most ancient aspirations to bring order and security to human settlements to all the hopes and hubris of modern, rational planning and the search for new models beyond that modern moment—and you are all that you will pass on, too. You will define and re-define planning through what you say and what you do, and that's the way it should be.

To state the obvious, you will write the rest of the story from here. I, for one, will not be trying to follow it on Twitter. I'm going to wait for the bigger installments. But I know there will be magic in it, it's a story I am dying to follow, and I hope you'll help me do that.

Thank you again for the honor of being here to share this with you. A very big thank you and congratulations to the family members, friends, and other loved ones who made it possible for you to achieve this—those special people who are here today and those who could not be.

My very best wishes to everyone, and thank you.

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