

GEP/NRSD Commencement Address, May 12, 2013

Rector Abdullah, Dean Goldgeier, Professor Shapiro, faculty colleagues, families and friends, and the GEP and NRSD graduating classes of 2013:

I'm honored to be asked to speak here today. I'll confess, I am reminded of an old joke. A woman has just given birth, and the doctor asks her husband if he'd like to cut the umbilical cord. The man looks at the scalpel, horrified, and replies "Surely there must be someone more qualified than me!"

Nonetheless, I'm happy to be here--in part because this graduating class started the program in the fall of 2011, which was my first semester as program director. So we've gone through the program together: here in Washington, through Skype and e-mail conversations during your travels around the world, and on my annual visit to U Peace. Most of what I've learned about our program—its challenges, its value, its potential—I have learned from you. So I thank you for that.

Three decades ago, I started work on my own Master's degree, in a program on energy policy at the University of Wisconsin. I was fresh out of college, and I knew very little. That was a different era—only a decade after the very first Earth Day—and we were much less knowledgeable about the challenge of sustainability. In fact, no one even used the word "sustainable" to describe what we were seeking. But, like today, the economy was in the dumps, and the public mood was anxious. I went to grad school because I knew these problems mattered—and because nobody was interested in paying me to work on them.

My mentor at Wisconsin was a professor named John Steinhart. John had worked in the Nixon White House in the late '60s and early '70s, until he grew disgusted with the Vietnam War and the political culture in Washington. So he moved back to Madison and started a program with some striking similarities to ours: problem-focused, interdisciplinary, border-crossing, and skeptical of top-down solutions. It lacked several of our advantages, to be sure—there were no tenured faculty other than John, no Washington location, and nothing like the wonderful partnership we enjoy with the University for Peace. It was run out of the back wing of the geology department, and it involved a motley crew of professors who John cajoled or bullied into giving some of their time. But the spirit was there, we did a lot, and I learned far more than I realized at the time.

One day Steinhart gave me something he'd written. I expected it to be a technical paper, but instead it was about the German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Kant was one of the true intellectual giants of the modern era. But John's essay was about the doubts and uncertainties that hounded him throughout his life. I learned that shortly before his death, Kant confessed that, despite a lifetime of inquiry and reflection, he still confronted three unanswered questions: What can I know? What can I hope? And what should I do?

Well. At age 22, I found this somewhat discouraging! If Kant couldn't figure it out, what were my chances? I've thought about this a lot over the years, and you may be disappointed to learn that I haven't gotten any further than Kant did.

But I do like the questions. They point me toward a few things worth noting as we seek a more sustainable world:

First, what can we know?

Well, we know that the problems we've studied—food, water, energy, the climate, biodiversity, pollution, ecosystem services, natural resource management—are large, they are pervasive, and they are not going away any time soon.

We know:

...that around the world, we have stressed ecosystems and renewable resources to the breaking point;

...that in a world of cell phones and I-Pads, far too many people lead lives that lack the basic dignity of clean water, breathable air, and healthy food;

...that we're messing with life-sustaining natural systems in perilous ways, and headed for consequences that we don't understand.

We also know that the problem isn't simply greed, ignorance, or poor policies, although we see each of those in abundance. The problem is rooted in the political, economic, and social structures that shape our modern world. So we know, ultimately, it's those structures that we must lead toward transformation.

Second, what can we hope?

Well, we shouldn't hope for magical technological solutions. We shouldn't hope that whispering the truth of these things in the king's ear will be enough.

And we shouldn't hope that powerful institutions, or even average citizens, wake up some Tuesday morning and say "Suddenly I see—you were right all along--we do have to change our ways!" That's not happening—even if that Tuesday morning is an 85 degree-day in January, in the middle of 4 inches of rainfall.

If we *can* hope—and I certainly think we can—then it seems to me that hope resides in a couple of places. The first is, oddly enough, globalization.

Globalization is part of the problem, to be sure—it lets us take the consequences of our rapacious ways and dump them onto someone else, out there somewhere. And globalization promotes our profoundly unsustainable way of life as a false ideal for those who have less, and who understandably want more.

But there's another side to globalization, a better side, which for me is reflected wonderfully in our program, and in our partnership with U Peace. It is easier now than at any time in history for people from different parts of the world to come together, share their experiences, and exchange useful forms of knowledge. And, if they are committed to it, they can do so in peace—that is, in fellowship and solidarity, rather than hierarchy and dependency. There's certainly hope in that.

The second source of hope, for me, is in a certain type of person—someone who can combine useful knowledge and practical skills with a sensibility that says “we need transformative solutions rather than just the quick fix.” In other words-- people like you. There are plenty of folks around who want to see that transformation, but who don’t really understand the problems or how to navigate all the institutional barriers to getting there. And there are plenty of others who *do* understand the problems and the institutions--but who have no vision beyond the next report, the next meeting, the next sabbatical, or the next quarterly earnings statement.

I came to American University because I see the challenge as joining the requisite knowledge and skills with an energetic idealism about what can be done. And after two years with you, I know most of you well enough to believe that you all came here for the same reason.

Finally, what should we do? What should you do?

Well, I’m through telling you what to do! I told you to get the reading done. I told you to finish your oral presentations in under 10 minutes, or face the buzzer. And I told you, I’m sorry, but that’s just not how you use a semi-colon.

But on the question of what to do, I’m reminded of a second book John Steinhart gave me, those many years ago. This one was called *The Promise of the Coming Dark Age*, by the radical historian L.S. Stavrianos.

Writing in the 1970s, Stavrianos foresaw difficult times ahead, with the familiar structures of modern life strained by growing populations, pollution, resource scarcity, and technologies increasingly beyond social control. But he argued that we shouldn't see these looming challenges as a plunge into the abyss. Rather, he foresaw the world entering a period of change and ferment that held great promise. He took inspiration from the so-called "dark ages" of medieval times, which weren't dark at all--they were actually a creative period of social experiments that laid a foundation for enlightenment and renewal. Perhaps today's challenges can also fuel transitions that will lead, ultimately, to a better world.

The question, of course, is how to get there, and what's our role. What I remember most about that book is an image--of grass growing up through cracks in a sidewalk. To me this seems to be the perfect metaphor. Have faith that people and communities, working together, can solve these problems. Given a chance, the grass will grow, and it doesn't need us to tell it how.

But also have a sledgehammer handy, because there's some concrete in the way. For some of us, swinging that sledgehammer will mean documenting and publicizing the problems. For others, it may mean poking holes in false solutions. It certainly will mean working to reform institutions—sometimes from outside, sometimes from within. However we do it, if we can open up the cracks in that pavement, the grass will surely grow up through the spaces we create.

So, whatever you determine your role to be—whatever *you* decide that *you* should do—I hope you will do it in that spirit.

Looking back, the most important thing my Master's experience did for me was to inspire me. If we have been able to do that in some small way, then we have succeeded.

Thank you, and to our graduates, my heartfelt congratulations.