

AUP Commencement Speech
May 25, 2009

Women and Men of the Class of 2009, undergraduates and graduates. In a way that I find particularly moving, we are graduating together today: you are coming to the end of your student years at AUP, and I to the close of my first year as president. In a few short moments, you will walk this stage from left to right, taking in hand the diplomas you have so richly earned, and then moving, as a group, to shift your tassels from one side to another. Indulge me—in these last moments between your old lives and your new ones, between your memories and your dreams—if I seize this irresistible opportunity to offer you some counsel. You can probably guess from the start that I am going to urge you to leadership; that I will challenge you to step up as early in your lives as you are able; and that I will insist that it is not just your responsibility to do so, but the deepest need of the world you are inheriting today.

I know I don't need to tell any of you what a good year it has been for leadership. You have before you, in this year of your Commencement, a case study in leadership or, as this sort of thing used to be called, a profile in courage worthy of emulation. In Barack Obama's steady, measured ascent to the presidency of the United States, a nation—indeed the entire free world—saw its most cherished principles ratified anew. At AUP's President's Conference last Monday, scholars from around the world gathered to consider the future of democracy, noting with evident relief that mature democracies have the resilience to right themselves, that political process, especially aided by technology, can surge upward from grass roots to bring an African-American, biracial man to the US presidency; that accountability and regulation are back in common parlance; that multilateralism, the belief that conflict can be resolved through dialog and exchange, through civil talks, has returned to foreign affairs; that clean energy and a concern for environmental sustainability is foremost in everyone's minds, as we set our sights for Copenhagen and the opportunities there for international public policy decisions; that the rule of law and concern for social justice are renewing themselves as we contemplate the close of Guantanamo and the ushering in, we fervently hope, of a new era of American international accountability.

Much has been said about Obama's nearly perfect campaign, the steadiness of his demeanor and thoughtfulness of his political positions, but too little has been written about the example of leadership he has set forth for us, the way he has embodied the dreams of a nation for its own future. His capacity to sense and speak the truth was enough to send Americans to the polls in record numbers, enough to inspire people of all persuasions, African Americans, Cuban-Americans, Latinos, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, and American muslims, steelworkers, teachers, lawyers, Hollywood, of course, and students, oh yes students, and that great undecided middle that takes presidents to the White House to participate in a newly invigorated political process. At the height of campaign rhetoric and in the fray of conflicting demands facing him in his first 100 days, he has remained almost unnervingly calm, disciplined, and focused upon the values to which he has given voice from the outset, in a way that has made the entire world feel safer.

It may seem, from where you are currently standing in your 20-something shoes, a long way between you and Obama. But that is less the case than you think. Here are a few things I wish someone had told me when I was your age, contemplating my own dreams with equal parts of exhilaration, self-consciousness, and fear. In the few moments remaining to me, I want to dispel four myths of leadership and insist upon three imperatives in hopes of pressing you to heed its urgent call.

First, you don't have to be larger-than-life or winningly charismatic. A few years back the Harvard Business Review reported on a study of the 20 CEOs of the top-performing companies in US history. Inventorying their character traits exhaustively, the researchers were only able to come up with one common denominator amongst them, one character trait that they could correlate across the lot, and that was humility. Some of them were very shy people, still others were poor public speakers. Yet those leaders had something akin to what the poet John Keats called "negative capability." Those men and women were able to empty themselves sufficiently of ego to channel the spirit, the values, indeed the futures of the companies they directed. They knew the simplest truth of leadership—that it was not about them.

Second, you don't have to do everything perfectly or be right all the time. You may be surprised to learn that communities and companies, organizations and families, schoolrooms and boardrooms are resilient enough to survive your errors. Great leaders make plenty of mistakes, but they differ from ordinary mortals in the use they make of them. I want to save you many sleepless nights, by instructing you not to beat yourself up for your mistakes. Sometimes errors set in evident relief the right path one should take next; sometimes they provide opportunities to deepen trust, by talking through what went wrong. You should always admit to your errors. Learn to welcome them when they come, and to treat yourself with great tenderness when you contemplate your own failures, celebrating the learning that results. It is not our successes, but our stumbling that saves us, our missteps that make us strong.

Third, you don't have to do it alone. What great leaders do is to galvanize all members of their community in the service of its mission. They do not so much stand out amongst others or stand up for them as substitutes, so much as stand up amongst them. When Obama called the American nation to public service last year, he triggered a multiplier effect, inspiring retirees, high school students, and ordinary people from all walks of life to volunteer, so many, in fact, that nonprofits and philanthropic organizations were not equipped to meet the huge demand. There is nothing so exhilarating, nor so lightening of the load, as that moment when men and women of good will lean into shared purpose. Leadership at its best is a collective act.

Fourth, leadership doesn't require the greatest stage in the nation. Classrooms need leaders, and so do clubs and associations of all kinds; communities and most of all families are crying out for dedicated leadership. I say families, because this social institution has been under siege for years—by the economics of work, for example, and the rise of divorce rates—yet families of whatever composition need attention, common projects, inspiration, and calls to action if they are to become the right kind of holding places for smart, stable, loved, and loving children, if they are to be home places for future leaders. Start practicing on what is closest at hand, maximizing your opportunities to develop your own leadership skills. I heard a story this past weekend about a 12 year old girl in New York City who sold 30,000 boxes of Girl Scout Cookies. Interviewed on CNN, she was asked how she did it. She looked straight into the camera, scratched her little face, and said: "At some point you just have to stop chatting and ask for the money."

There are also a few things you **MUST** do if you are to take on the challenge of leadership. Let me go on to my three imperatives.

You do need to be disciplined. It turns out that leadership is not glamorous; it is mainly, like many things in life worth doing, hard work—a matter of setting goals and refusing to be deterred from them. Obama never missed a daily workout on the campaign trail, and the rhythm of his presidency is as regular. His team members speak often of the pleasures and reassurance of working with "no drama

Obama.” It was a great relief to read, when I was a student myself, that assiduousness more than IQ, had a documented impact on success in life. Great leaders keep their eye on the prize, take nothing personally, expect failure some of the time, and still move unswervingly in pursuit of their goals.

At the same time, and this may seem paradoxical, you need to cultivate your own capacity for improvisation—and don’t get me wrong, I don’t mean by that “winging it” when you are not prepared. I’m drawing here on the metaphor of jazz—and on the extraordinary synergies that occur when you allow yourself to be drawn into the music, holding back when it’s appropriate to do so, respecting the space of your fellow musicians, and taking the lead creatively and exuberantly when your own voice is called for. There is nothing so satisfying as making live music with others, modulating your own melody in responsive joy. Great jazz requires multiple solos, as well as some boisterous cacophony. If you are hellbent on realizing your own personal vision, if you are not leading for the sake of a commonly held cause, you will forget to make beautiful music with others; in your haste to become a visionary leader, to paraphrase Jim Collins, you will miss the chance to make yours a visionary organization.

And finally, you DO have to lead with soul, with authentic voice, and with impeccable integrity. You need to take your direction repeatedly from your own ethical compass, continually checking and rechecking your bearings. In privilege, in education, begins responsibility. The financial crisis from which the world is struggling to emerge will drag 80 million people below the poverty line, 50 million from their jobs, before it is over. First world countries will emerge first, relatively intact, and you may not read in the news about the long, delayed tsunami effect on developing countries around the globe. The crisis will be declared officially “over” well before it ends for those receiving its long, slow whiplash. Think of the possibilities for leadership in the wake of the global financial crisis. Think of the failures of leadership—economic, political, moral—that led to it.

In this, my own first year as president of The American University of Paris, I have learned that becoming a leader is something like fixing an airplane while you are flying it. It is the hardest work I have ever done. But I have also learned that there is nothing on this earth that I would rather be doing. I learned that this year when students in AUP’s Environmental Club became my greatest allies in setting an agenda for the University’s first steps toward sustainability. I learned that when I stood in the great room of the library at Trinity College Dublin celebrating with the AUP faculty member and students who had worked for a decade publishing Samuel Beckett’s letters. I learned that anew when I went to the dinner of the Communications students the other night, and spoke with a number of you about your dream jobs. One of you said, I will be returning to my country, Nigeria, to become a professor at the university; another said, I will be teaching humanitarian communications, hopefully at AUP; still another will be putting your communications skills toward a broader public understanding of autism; another wants to make documentary films on the conflict in the Middle East. Some of you are headed for the business world, but with a sense of values that will be transformative of it. These are the rewards of leadership for me and for my faculty and staff colleagues at AUP—these are the bountiful rewards. No paycheck, no matter how generous, can inspire you back to the office more than the vision of students determined to make a difference—hopeful, committed, and green.

Inspiring young people to step into their own beckoning and brilliant futures is what I intend to do at AUP as long as I have breath in my body; and that is what I and your professors, gathered alongside me on this stage, charge you to do with your lives today. Go forth as our emissaries. Feel morally responsible to the world. Risk the discipline and the rewards of leadership. You who will be AUP graduates in just one more minute—given your facility with languages, your ability to slip like fish between cultures, your talent for the sometimes strenuous negotiation of difference, and your sense of

yourselves as standing up amongst others—will be the best prepared inheritors we know of our complex and globalizing world. The world has never needed...your bold leadership....more.

Celeste Schenck