

Celeste Schenck
Commencement 2010
May 22, 2010

Members of the Class of 2010, I salute you on this day of your graduation. In a few short moments, you will walk this stage from left to right, taking in hand the diplomas you have so richly earned. Here you will be participating in a quintessentially American academic ritual, one compelling enough, year after year, on campuses around the world, to inspire your professors to put on their colorful regalia, march to ageless pomp and circumstance, and serve as witnesses to your Commencement. Indulge me—in these last few moments between your old lives and your new ones, between your memories and your dreams—if I exercise this irresistible opportunity to offer you some counsel. You probably know from the start that I am going to urge you to become men and women of integrity, 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.

Last year at precisely this time, several graduating seniors had the courage to write to me about what they perceived were increased incidences of cheating on campus—this included both plagiarism and new methods of cheating made all too easy by technology. One of those students, I remember well, asked me to intervene, because, she wrote, “I know that you care about the academic reputation of our university. You care about who we are.” I appointed a Task Force on Academic Integrity and Excellence composed of students, faculty, staff and even trustees and what ensued was a year of soul searching on the AUP campus. In classrooms and boardrooms, in the student newspaper and on the faculty senate floor, in meetings of the student government association and the board of trustees, we discussed, as a community, how the times and technology had brought these issues forth, how we might address them in our midst, indeed, what kind of university we wanted to be. Faculty, staff, and students, working together, articulated new processes, new standards, and new sanctions, and created a code of ethics to be signed by all constituencies in the fall. We aren’t all the way there yet, but we are having the right conversations.

I wanted to honor our whistleblowers today, at your commencement, because they helped us find our way home. And I tell this story publicly to model for you, members of our graduating class, that it is possible to stumble and to recover. A year later, we have turned this situation around, having become in the process a stronger university, and you, the Class of 2010, the first to feel the impact, have been full participants in the change. I am proud to lead an institution, indeed

an American university abroad, where academic integrity matters and where academic excellence is continually on the rise. That is more than can be said of some of the world's finest corporations and financial houses in which, over the past few years, the whistleblowers blew in vain.

AUP is far from the only university having to face down breaches of academic integrity. The University of Minnesota, just last year, reported that cases of academic dishonesty had increased 44 per cent in just one year. Even the Ivies have succumbed. BBC News reported that nearly 5000 people were caught cheating in last year's CDSEs and A-levels in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. Prominent scholars and historians and journalists have faced plagiarism charges. Employers have repeatedly decried the impact on business of trafficked credentials and misrepresented expertise. Tell me, would you want your doctor, or worse, your surgeon, to have fudged his or her boards?

The reason your professors and I feel so strongly about these matters is not that we are hopelessly old-fashioned, or that we insist you walk to school in the snow as we did. We do what we do in this life because nothing matters more to us than your learning. We do not want you to deprive yourselves of the joy of hewing into new subjects each semester with a mixture of excitement and apprehension, struggling each time to wrap your mind around a new discipline. We want you to experience firsthand your own real and authentic improvement. We want you to feel the power of your own success. That is the essence of learning, and it requires the pluck to assume over and over during the course of a lifetime what some have called a "beginner's mind." It means you have to be willing to start in the place of "not knowing," tolerate the anxiety of leaning into a new subject or field, and the less-than-perfect grades that track your path toward mastery, so that you can achieve the exhilarating sense that a subject has become yours.

Let me make perfectly clear, here, that I am not blaming you, members of the class of 2010, for the rash of cheating on college campuses, nor am I asserting that everything is the fault of generation Y, children of the Baby Boomers, "digital natives" who just happened to come of age at a time of cutting and pasting. I have known you to be—up close and personal—hardworking, engaged, honorable human beings who care passionately about the fate of our planet, the state of our nations, and the interdependence of all human cultures. In fact, the tribal elders have failed you. I do not mean by that, of course, the parents and grandparents sitting in this theatre with you as you graduate, those who have loved you through thick and thin, who have sacrificed for your education, and to whom I hope you will express your gratitude with great tenderness tonight. I am referring to the public figures, the CEOs, the politicians and the popular heroes whose sins we read about daily in the papers. People whose cheating, no matter how you define it, affects the lives of

thousands of others. It has been estimated that the global financial crisis will drag 80 million below the poverty line, cost the jobs of some 50 million others worldwide before it is over. I don't need to tell you about the related catastrophes of hyped stock prices, short selling, deregulation, conflicts of interest, greed, dubious accounting practices, unseemly corporate bonuses, erroneous balance sheets, and, more recently, the wages of subprime lending that kicked off the crisis. You will recognize the names of the fallen: Enron and Arthur Anderson, Worldcom and Washington Mutual, Lehman Brothers and Bear Stearns, AIG and the insurance industry. And then there was Madoff.

You see, academic integrity is a subset of a far greater concern of mine, and that is, of course, integrity proper. I don't need to define that for you or launch into semantics: it means doing the right thing, as accurately as you can call it, as transparently as you can manage it, from where you are sitting right now. It means taking your direction repeatedly from your own ethical compass, continually checking and rechecking your bearings. Ultimately, as the great banking, investment, and insurance firms learned over the past few years, and as my courageous AUP student expressed it last year, integrity is inextricably bound up with identity: you are what you do. It is also bound up with how you treat others, how you situate yourself in a world held in common, how you purposefully make the daily choices that express who you are. Bear with me, in the few moments remaining to me today, as I venture a few tips for making your way more comfortably down the often dark passageway that is moral decision-making.

First, don't expect it to be easy. I can tell you from some experience of sleepless nights that it is always harder to do the right thing. Right and wrong are not always easily distinguishable or neatly opposed; the choices open to us often array themselves in complex patterns and involve tradeoffs and discernment. I have spent thousands of dollars, over the years, calling my college roommate for advice, and I recommend that you too turn to your closest friends and mentors, because it is always a relief to talk through our moral dilemmas, but I warn you that we are most often alone with our most important life choices and their consequences. Here is something that might help. When faced with a moral choice, I have learned to welcome the slight flutter in my chest that tells me inevitably which road will be harder, which will require courage, and which I must inevitably take. Although I confess to having taken the easier route on many occasions, especially when I was standing in your shoes, I learned that I was inevitably forced to retrace my steps. I encourage you to develop your own visceral Geiger counter and to head straight into the ticking. Your body will often know before your heart does what choice needs to be made.

Second, treat your personal relationships with the same moral scrupulousness as your professional ones. And don't make the mistake of thinking you have such a thing as a private life distinct from the public. The internet and social networking have taken care of that. Ultimately you will be judged, and you will judge yourselves, by the quality of the personal relationships you establish and maintain, each one of which requires that wholeness of character we call integrity. Develop as early as you can a code of behavior to govern your own conduct, striving always for honesty in matters of the heart. Have standards and live up to them. Never avoid the face-to-face admission or lie about emotional matters. You betray yourself each time you do. Consider that the worst dishonesty in personal relationships may not be the outright lie, but the failure over time to show up, to be fully present to the other. Being honorable in this way will stand you in good stead in later life, as you assume the responsibilities and privileges of partnership and family. Your friends, spouses, and children will respect you for being ethically rigorous, and you will come to love yourself for it. It's one of those things that gets easier with practice, and has a lifelong impact on your posture.

Third, repair your mistakes. It may be heartening to you to know that few decisions are irrevocable, especially at your age. Should you fail to do the right thing, there is always time to set things right. Life is long for that, and forgiving. I have learned that misunderstandings, arguments, verbal missteps, and even failures of nerve can, oddly enough, provide occasion for the deepest intimacy if you take the risk of staying at the moment of conflict and offering up your own vulnerability first. Nothing beats a sincere apology. Another skill to cultivate, I might say in passing, is that of graciously accepting the apology of another person who has screwed up the courage to come clean.

Fourth, remember that there is integrity in an eloquent no, that of dignified dissent, or refusal to accede to the terms of others if they violate your own principles. As you move out of the house of your parents, literally and symbolically, it becomes yours to parent yourself, to refuse to be treated in ways inconsistent with your self esteem. There is honor too in denouncing behaviors you know to be wrong, such as injustice wherever it may lay. No to subjection of the weak, no to racial stereotypes, cultural slurs or epithets, no to cheating when it is going on before your eyes. With education comes responsibility.

Fifth, keep in mind that integrity, like the environment, knows no country. It is one of those things that bind us across a globe of differences. Even in a language you do not understand you can read character and sense moral steadiness. At AUP, you have learned that there is no French nor American nor Cote d'Ivoirian nor Saudi nor Swedish way of doing the right thing. In the

amazing “third place” of our learning community, where no one is precisely “at home,” where each of us leans across the habitual borders of national and cultural identity, we have an opportunity to bring forth our best, most open, most respectful, most malleable, yet morally coherent selves. At AUP, you have had the opportunity to practice for a world in need of leaders capable of both complex reasoning and moral decision-making, people who can, when called to, put those they love and beyond that the common good first.

As you head out of this theater today, go forth as our emissaries. This is what I, and your professors gathered alongside me on this stage today, charge you to do with your lives. Feel morally responsible to the world. Struggle honorably with the choices of your lives. 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 kind of citizen...more.

