

Leadership School Talk (2016)

Each generation has a call, a duty. We don't choose it, it chooses us. This generation's call is to build an exemplary home for our nation. We shouldn't be distracted by naysayers or doomsdayers. We should not expect it to be easy. There will always be weeds in the garden and there will also be unexpected frosts and droughts. Yet to live, we plant and sow. Man-made catastrophes and obstacles are the same. They are part of nature. Like weeds, frosts and droughts, there will always be corruption, greed, selfishness, violence, ignorance. This are not an excuse to do nothing, give up, or become like such people.

Like any natural disaster, we need to prepare for it and overcome it. The way forward in every generation is the same - build . . . be vigilant, strong, hopeful, caring, aim to leave a better world behind than you inherited. As important as what you do, is how you do it. You cannot be impatient or quickly discouraged. You should learn from setbacks, they are precious lessons on how to do better next time. Critics are our best allies - they force us to think harder, address weakness, correct flaws in our thinking and our actions. Instead of taking offense, listen to them. To borrow a phrase from Gov. Dukakis, who visited AUA this week, "Pathos-mathos" Hardship teaches us. Life is a struggle and it always will be. The way to build is through patience, persistence, clear thinking, careful planning, respect for others, remembering that today's opponents in any society are our neighbors and tomorrow's allies. Instead of alienating and trying to harm them, it is better to try to engage with them to change their minds and hearts.

Have a simple goal: a secure, prosperous country, that is so attractive that everyone wants to live, work, and create here. This is our paradise, if we choose to make it one. We have water, sun, earth, brains and strength. As you know, I am an attorney. I often talk to lawyers and human rights experts who work with indigenous peoples. Many indigenous peoples have lost their homelands and languages, and are now stateless and on the verge of extinction. They all say that they envy the Armenians, "you have done well, you have managed to stay on your aboriginal land, reestablish your independence, maintain your culture, and save your nation." Indeed, Armenians do not appreciate how fortunate we are. Our nation has never been better off or had more resources. We must not squander this period. A thousand years ago, in the heyday of Ani, St. Gregory of Narek wrote his Book of Lamentations: What was the tragedy? From whose perspective? The tragedy is that we squander our opportunities to do good, to build, to make a better world. In his colophon to the Narek. St. Gregory uses the phrase "written in one of the rare periods of relative tranquility."

Civilization is the periods between the natural and man-made catastrophes that are endemic to this planet and species.

Two lessons: First, Do not be paralyzed waiting for things to be perfect. Thinking people often succumb to analysis paralysis. Second, do not assume that because the grass looks greener elsewhere, it really is or will always be that way. First, it may only seem so. You only see the flaws up close. Secondly, it may not last. All things change. Finally, and most importantly, it is one thing to live in someone else's green pasture by their rules and another to create your own and live by your own rules. And learn how to "dance in the rain, rather than wait for the storm to pass."

2500 years ago, the Greek historian, Thucydides, wrote: "The secret to happiness is freedom... And the secret to freedom is courage." Thucydides. We feel free when we are autonomous. Autonomy means rules of own's own making and rulers of one's own choosing. Living with the consciousness of one's autonomy, whatever the scope, key to happiness and our highest self-realization.

Not everyone has the fortitude and courage to use their freedom and create their own habitat, but those that do, live more rewarding lives than those that have lived as guests in someone else's world. In English they say make "hay when the sun shines."

This generation has opportunities and resources that our grandparents and great grandparents only dreamt of. The next generation will ask, what did they do with it? Did they use it well? Why didn't they make more of it? Sitting around grumbling, complaining, envying, or pointing out others' mistakes is not building. It is a waste of time and energy. This generation has to shake off the addiction to "kitchen-bitchin'" and the fear of being a chump. These two social diseases are destroying us and preventing us from making the most of ourselves and our country. Kitchen-bitchin' comes from an entitlement mentality that the world owes you a living and conditions. It is a form of learned helplessness and a source of corruption. Similarly, saying "others don't follow the law, or do not behave properly, why should I?" is a downward spiral and a low productivity trap for a society. If the law is no good, fix it. If it is not properly administered, challenge it, demand proper administration. Throwing one's hands up and grumbling to one's self and one's friends is not a solution, it reinforces your disempowerment.

Yes, of course, it would be nice if everyone did the right thing, was courteous and fair, and had supervisors that prevent abuses before they happened. That is part of the social contract we all make with those who govern us. However, in no society is that social contract perfectly drafted or perfectly implemented. This is where living under laws of our own making comes in. It means we need to take responsibility for making the laws and making them work properly. Until human beings become angels, the only option is vigilance, correction and patience. While it is not possible to enforce one's way in to a just, fair world, it is possible to indeed necessary to constantly mend the tattered fabric of the social contract, at the same time promoting education and values through example. Self-regulation of each person is the only way to create a fair, just and secure polity. That the place to start is oneself.

Instead of worrying so much about what others are doing and saying, we should worry more about what we are doing and not doing. To hold others accountable, starts with holding oneself accountable. Change comes by setting an example. People learn more by actions than words. Even the most corrupt and hard-hearted change when they see people persistently sincerely doing and demanding the right thing despite indifference and sometimes active opposition. Do the right thing with dignity and healthy confidence, but carefully, humbly, without self-righteousness and recklessness. There are no monoliths. There is always play in the system. Work with the play in the system. The most important virtues for constructive work are vigilance and prudence.

The philosopher Comte wrote that "prudence is the disposition that makes it possible to deliberate correctly on what is good or bad for ourselves and our society (not in the abstract but in the world as it is, and not in general but in specific situations) and through such deliberation to act appropriately. It could be called good sense, but in the service of good will." Prudence is learned and taught by experience. Pathema, mathema.

"If you think in terms of a year, plant a seed; if in terms of ten years, plant trees; if in terms of 100 years, teach the people." Confucius

- information war - quiet but intense professionalization of interpreting, translation and propaganda services;
- technological superiority - under-the-radar science r&d;

- know one's world – accurate, fine-grained picture of the challenges we face. Generalities will fool us. Encyclopedic preparation of info on leadership of each major neighbor or potential ally.
- effectively promote solid ideas as pan-national goals so that we are not working at cross purposes. Coordination is key.

Some parting thoughts:

It doesn't take everyone. It just takes a few people to make a difference: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." – Margaret Mead.

Avoid distraction, remain concentrated and vigilant: "The things that matter most should not be at the mercy of the things that matter least" – Goethe.