Philanthropy in an Interconnected World and the Role of the Individual

Before I begin, I would like to take a moment to reflect on the challenges and difficulties your city and state have faced in the recent flood. I know I am not alone in my concern about your neighbors, colleagues and friends affected by the disaster. I know many of you have been touched by this crisis, and that this is a time when you find strength in one another. This is not the first time this community has faced this challenge, but each time, those close to the crisis and those watching are moved by the way neighbors care for one another, and our best thoughts are with you.

I am glad to be part of a ceremony and celebration that goes on despite the trials of the past week. Thank you so much for having me. It is a pleasure to be here today and I want to thank the Vanderbilt community for giving me the opportunity to speak to you. It is exciting to address people on the verge of bringing their ambitions and ideas to a greater world outside of their school. It is a privilege to provoke them to thought one more time before they leave the home of their formal education.

On the eve of your graduation from Vanderbilt, one of our most distinguished houses of learning, I would like to ponder with you a question: Why do we educate? Why do institutions go to the considerable time, trouble and expense of building colleges and universities, peopling them with the best and brightest they can attract, and teaching them to the best of their ability? Why do students work for years to get admitted, scrounge for the funds to attend, and then spend a fifth of their young lives in study?

The students might have a ready answer—education is the key to greater opportunities and prosperity in their lives. In college, students gain the skills they need, earn a degree that stands as a mark of their experience and knowledge, and often form the relationships and connections that will give them chances to put their learning to use.

But what stake do the rest of us have in this institution? Why should we teach, or contribute to our alma maters, or mentor the young people coming out of them? The answer is that for most of us, the college and its graduates are a part of our community. The people who learn today work and exercise their ambition tomorrow. We all have a vested interest in supporting the best thinkers and learners in our community. We also remember our own educations, and the countless people who contributed to who we are and what we have accomplished. We recognize that there’s a debt that we owe. We have an appreciation for the value of learning.

Let us consider for a moment what happens when we learn. It’s something you’ve all been doing with great concentration and motivation for the past four years, and I’d like to examine it more closely. Learning is change. It is not a confirmation of fact or opinion. It is not elaboration on familiar sets of knowledge. Learning occurs in the moments when we meet revelations. It’s a challenge to what you know, or think you know. It’s a remapping of the world around you.

This process and these moments are not always comfortable. The can alarm you, or even make you angry. But they always make you think.

As you leave the structure of school, where you have support to help you confront these moments of learning, please bear in mind that you are not done yet. These challenges will always find you. The real test of your education will be how you face these challenges on your own.

Let me give you an example. Think of the burqa, the full body veil that has brought much media attention to Afghanistan, and in the west has become an iconic symbol of female oppression and has been used as a barometer of social change for Afghan women. A dear friend of mine moved
to Afghanistan a few years ago to start an NGO and help Afghan women. We spoke before she left and I remember the very strong visceral feelings she had about the burqa. It represented for her all that was wrong and vexing with the situation of women in Afghanistan.

When she returned some time later, we sat down for coffee and I sensed that there had been a shift in her view. She had come to see that the intense media attention the burqa has received in the west, through photos and documentaries and articles, was out of proportion with the reality she found in Afghanistan. For many Afghan women she met, unveiling was not in fact a primary preoccupation. They were more worried about shelter, clean water, food, healthcare, an opportunity to make a livelihood. Many wore it as a matter of choice. Some wore it to increase their mobility. And many who wore it were thoughtful, strong, capable women. My friend had come to see that just because a woman wore a burqa did not necessarily mean that she was oppressed or beaten or that she was not an active participant in her own future. This was not easy for her to accept, it challenged her pre-conceived notions. But she left herself open to the challenge, open to a shift in the way she perceived the world, and that is what learning is.

You will have these moments whether you seek them out or not. In fact, you will not be able to avoid them. These revelations will come to you partly because the world is becoming a smaller place. We are more connected to other people, other countries, and other cultures through our greater sharing of commerce, ideas, politics, and information.

Even if you would be more comfortable in a small community, avoiding the topic of politics at parties, reading only the publications and writers that share your opinions, new ideas and points of view will still reach you. You may not have a choice about that. What you do with these challenges is your choice, though.

This is not a question to take lightly. The easiest thing is to ignore facts and feelings that don't match up with an idea of your world and yourself. We spend a lot of time building up our perception of people and events. When something is out of step with that perception, it can seem like too much work to rewrite it.

But this is what you have been practicing for with your time here. While leaving school may feel like a time to set your thoughts and practices in stone, it's really a time to experience and experiment. As W.E.B. Du Bois said, "Education is that whole system of human training within and without the school house walls".

Now that you are leaving those walls, I can think of no better way to honor your education and your community than to use your learning and skills to make the world a better place than you find it.

You get to determine the size of your world. It can be just you. It can be your family, school, and friends. It can be your country. It can be your gender. Or the people who share your opinions. Or interests. It could be people who share a difficulty or illness with you. But it can be more. I would urge you, throughout your lives, to expand your knowledge by expanding your community.

Earlier, we spoke about the world of your university, students, teachers and supporters. I would like to extend this idea to the greater world. A community is not just a set of people who have things in common. It is a complicated organism, one which requires different people and points of view to thrive. A complete community needs people who work with their hands, and people who work with their minds. It demands an older generation that's had years of experience, and new blood to bring about innovation. It must have people who are cautious, and people who are bold. It needs women and men. It needs loyalists and also critics. A community must recognize want and care for its own. Sometimes the people who need the most help are the hardest to see.
I'm going to ask something difficult of you. I ask you to seek out those in your community in need. To try, not just to understand them, but to help them. It is hard to make a connection with suffering. It requires you to take on some of that pain for yourself. It makes you see a kinship with misfortune, and to see how it could happen to you, or how you would feel.

But there's an impulse to turn away from those in need, from a beggar in the street to images on television. This impulse comes partly from this pain, but also from apathy, and its insidious, enormous negative power.

It was Helen Keller who said, "Science may have found a cure for most evils, but it has found no remedy for the worst of them all--the apathy of human beings."

Is this because we want to refute connection to other people's problems? Have we in the rich industrialized world become too lulled in lives of comfort? Are a tranquilized people so entangled in the pursuit of luxury and self-gratification and entertainment that we don't take the time to think about the hardships of people less fortunate than we are? The great Physician William Osler said, "By far the most dangerous foe we have to fight is apathy - indifference from whatever cause, not from a lack of knowledge, but from carelessness, from absorption in other pursuits, from a contempt bred of self satisfaction."

It's easy to stage a dialogue in your mind, knowing that troubles exist and you're lucky to be far away from them, but not knowing how to help. The argument can go something like this:

"I didn't do anything to contribute to the problem, so it's not my responsibility. I don't have the money or time to fix it." So the thinking goes. I think there is an element of truth in that. Perhaps it has to do with not refuting the connection, but with the pain we feel because we know the connection is there. We can imagine how it feels. We don't want to know that pain first hand, and so turning away is often the easiest way to deal with it.

Or perhaps, apathy comes from the belief that we are helpless. That suffering is pervasive and a way of life as long as there have been people on this planet. That poverty and the associated suffering are both ubiquitous and inevitable in the human experience. The suffering in this world is so widespread and of such mass scale, that we feel overwhelmed by it. We are defeated by it and we slowly turn fatalistic and lose our sense of moral urgency. Our perception of impotence at the face of all this becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and gradually we lose our impetus to relieve suffering. Why try when we can't change anything?

We need to be open to this pain, because when we are, we have no choice but to help. It becomes our pain. This is a difficult process, because it requires not just knowledge, and not just learning, but imagination.

We need tools to help us make that connection, to make the abstract real. How is this accomplished? In your time in college, you no doubt took a great many classes geared towards a specific career. The practical applications of your science classes, or your economics lectures, or your engineering schematics, were probably always in your minds. But a full education requires humanities as well, classes with art and books and music. We need this kind of education to give us a window into the minds of others.

In this regard, the novel has a unique ability. I recall reading a novel called What is the What, by Dave Eggers, a book about the plight of a South Sudanese refugee during that country's devastating civil war. What I knew about that war and its toll on the people of South Sudan was from random newspaper articles. But Egger's book, with its humanity, its humor and its vast compassion for its subject, brought the war to me in a real and personal way every night when I sat down to read it. It made it impossible for me to gloss over the suffering of the Dinka people. Because I suddenly knew who they were.
With regards to my own books, I get letters from India, South Africa, Tel Aviv, Sidney, London, Arkansas. People tell me they want to send money to Afghanistan. One reader told me he wanted to adopt an Afghan orphan. It's a great honor for me when readers write me that Afghanistan for them is no longer just the caves of Tora Bora and Poppy Fields and Bin Laden, but that think of my homeland as more than just another unhappy, chronically troubled, afflicted land. In these letters, I see the unique ability fiction has to connect people through universal human experiences.

So with a recognition of the need to support your community, and the compassion to drive you to help, what next? It is important to consider the practical course and the action you can take. A mantra of the world of volunteer and philanthropy work is the idea of "give five percent". It can be five percent of your time, or five percent of your money. It has echoes of the biblical idea of tithing. It is a small piece of your luck and prosperity that you owe back to the community. It's something that everyone can manage. If you work forty hours a week, two hours spent with someone less fortunate than you can make a world of difference.

I know this is a tall order and a formidable challenge for people who have so much before them already. It's not an easy world you've inherited, and right now you might be wondering how you will face the personal changes life has in store for you. But I would say that to consider others is not an additional burden but an increased opportunity. Here is a place you can always help, and be appreciated for who you are and what you are capable of. When you see the difference that you make in other people's worlds, you must be alive to the change you can make in your own. It is a way to be strong, to be wise, and to know the measure of your own powers.

There is also a loyal and intimate society between people who dedicate themselves to service. The people you meet will never forget who you are and what you are capable of.

You can also think of it as a chance to give the part of you that sparkles brightest. If you are a great writer or reader, it's an opportunity to take your love and skill and tutor in literacy. If you're clever with your hands, perhaps there's a house that needs building. If you are outgoing and charismatic, why not use that skill to make phone calls or meet people and engage others in your cause?

I have tried to engage people around the world in my cause through the Khaled Hosseini Foundation. The foundation was inspired by a 2007 trip that I made to Afghanistan as a Goodwill Envoy for the UNHCR (the UN Refugee Agency). I met repatriated former refugee families who lived on less than $1 per day, spent winters in tents or holes dug underground. They lived with little shelter, little food, and with little access to education. In the villages I visited, the elders told me that they routinely lost ten to fifteen children to the freezing temperatures every winter. As a father myself, I was overwhelmed and heartbroken. As an Afghan, I felt connected to their suffering. I decided that I would do whatever was in my power to advocate for these people, give them a sense of control over their own lives, and to provide them with some basic needs, especially shelter and education, so that they can contribute to rebuilding their broken country.

My work with this foundation would be impossible without the help of individuals. And today I want to thank two specific individuals. I extend my gratitude to Janice and Ed Nichols for their generous support and warm interest in the cause of the people of Afghanistan. Your generous contribution, Mr. and Mrs. Nichols, will reach and change many lives in Afghanistan, especially those of women and children, who remain the most vulnerable and most underserved groups. I thank you on my behalf and on theirs.

I wish you prosperity and excitement in your new lives. I look forward to seeing what this generation will accomplish, with its great capacity to connect and to imagine. I know that I have much to learn from you in the coming years. Together we will continue our educations in the
community of the world, where we can see ourselves in our fellow humans, whether in pain or passion or hope. Today, I am honored to consider myself part of your community.