

Change through Communities
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Good afternoon, fellow graduates, families and friends, and professors. It is a beautiful, rainy day to be graduating. I am sure you feel as I do that our time at GPIA/Milano has flown by. I'm sure you feel, as I do, an unsettling sense of relief that we've made it: we've taken the last exam, written a thesis, and presented practicum projects to clients. Maybe you also feel a tickling sense of excitement and maybe a little trepidation for the possibilities in our future, our new beginnings.

I count us amongst the fortunate because we have studied in an unorthodox institution that is set in the midst of one of the most exciting cities in the world. I would argue that New York is partly exciting because of its density. Density closes the space between one individual and the next, forcing us to share physical space which in turn can lead to our lives being affected by our neighbors', if we so choose. Studying in New York has meant that we have not been isolated from reality, that in fact, reality has informed our studies. It has meant that on our walk to the registrar's office on 5th Avenue, we've passed by the man on the street singing Madonna songs. And on our walk from the registrar's office to East 16th, we've walked down one of the most famous avenues of the world along with hundreds and thousands of others, all rushing to their destination.

The institution of the New School University is built with certain values and ideas which the institution markets to attract similarly minded people which helps to perpetuate those values and ideas.

Although I think, and you might agree, that the values and ideas that have become the New School tradition are great, you might also concede, as I have, that they are not the norm and they are not shared by the majority. But the point of this education is not to instill in us our pre-existing perspectives in more elegant constructions, but to help us see the roots of these perspectives and to understand that others have very different perspectives. The point of this education is to give us the tools to intelligently engage with others.

We dream about the perfect job—an assistant producer for indie documentaries, a reporter out in Tripoli, a regional director for Slum Dwellers International, humanitarian aid officer for Doctors without Borders, a policy analyst at a think tank, an advisor to the President.

And certainly those doors are open to us and many of us will, or already have achieved those goals.

But the real value of our education is in the ability to negotiate the everyday realities of our world, how we interact with the man who sings Madonna on the street in order to ask for money or how we choose to engage when an individual in the rush of New Yorkers down 5th Avenue walks into our path.

I just returned from a trip to Bangladesh, the country where I was born and where my extended family still lives. I was there for a wedding so I didn't have much time to travel, but I did go to a local elementary school, an open air vegetable and fish market, a local temple, and a jeans factory. I think often it is not until we are in a foreign environment that we become aware of daily realities. The challenges that people living in Bangladesh face are plenty, but as an outsider, I felt it was important to some extent engage in and understand what those challenges are.

Bangladesh, like New York, is one of the most densely populated places in the world. The lack of private space forces people to interact. Late into the night, when the sun along with the blazing heat has long subsided, the streets are full of people, catching up, making plans. High rise apartment buildings are quickly replacing the one story houses of my parents' youth, and each apartment is often populated by more than one nuclear family. Each member has responsibilities that contribute to the well-being of the family as a whole. The neighbors of these buildings know each other well, not just by name, but fathers' names and sometimes grandfathers' names.

This interconnectedness between people and families became obvious when the women in the family went to the salon to get our hands painted with henna. My less than 1 year old cousin was held by half a dozen different women, including women who worked at the salon, while my aunt had intricate leaves and vines delicately painted up and down her fingers in henna. In no way is Bengali society perfect with its deep class, religious and economic schisms, but I observed a sense of community there that is less obvious in my own everyday reality here in New York, outside of the confines of this university community.

The values and vision of the New School institution have brought all of us together and I suspect that after graduate school, we will miss that assumed sense of community which we have enjoyed here. I know I will certainly miss Will, the tall security guard at W12th, who is always ready with a smile and if you're lucky, a hug. And I will miss Nana who has, in countless ways, affected and improved all of our lives. I will especially miss our little trusted Spain with its grumpy old waiters for after class drinks. Despite the successes that will surely come our way and the challenges that we will face, I encourage all of you to seek and create your own communities. Use your power of empathy to reach out to the people

with whom you share space. Learn their histories, appreciate their quirks, allow yourself to become a better person because of them.

It is through the power of empathy that collective imaginations take shape and it is through the power of collective imaginations that radical change happens, that populations across North Africa and the Middle East rise up and assert their own rights.

I encourage you to seamlessly move in and out of rooms, the buildings, the cars, all those physical things that create divisions, move in and out of the social hierarchical structures, all those invisible dividers, to, in effect, increase the density of the space you inhabit, to actively enable a more inclusive community.

You will perhaps find that there will be times when you will feel more vulnerable than you've ever felt: maybe a supervisor will disrespect you; maybe you will have a hard time finding a job; maybe you will make a mistake and will be left unforgiven. Life is messy. It is during these times, especially, that you will need to look beyond your own circumstances, to gain perspective, and to find a way out.

It is through our communities that we will find our passions, what we want to spend our lives doing and changing. Our communities will inspire us to do great things, beyond our own expectations. When we are faced with the most difficult challenges of our lives, our communities will support us and provide us with the motivation to know how to navigate the challenges.

We are busy, and in the upcoming years, we will become more so as we focus on cementing our careers. We will be inundated with a million things both large and small, but we have to find a way to live consciously.

To think and make ourselves think, to not be lazy and fall into routine without thinking;

To act deliberately and try to understand the consequences of our actions;

To listen and speak and listen some more;

It means we have to be curious about the people and the world around us.

Forging a community will help us ground ourselves in reality so that we do not forget our larger purpose.

With this request, I welcome you, my fellow students of the Class of 2011, to our new beginnings.

Congratulations.