

MIT 150 | Secretary-General Kofi Atta Annan—1997 MIT Commencement Address

GRAY: It is my privilege to welcome to this lectern his excellency, Kofi Annan, the seventh Secretary General of the United Nations and the 1972 graduate of the Institute. Mr. Annan will now give the commencement address.

[APPLAUSE]

ANNAN: Thank you very much. Thank you, Dr. Gray for your most gracious welcome. I am honored and pleased to have been asked to speak to you on this grand occasion and in these familiar surroundings. The Boston area boasts of several excellent institutions of higher learning, but there is only one MIT.

[APPLAUSE]

President, trustees, ladies and gentlemen, let us congratulate the best, the brightest, the most dedicated, the most thoughtful, and the most likely to succeed MIT class ever-- the class of 1997.

[APPLAUSE]

But graduates, you know better than anyone that you did not do it alone. Accordingly, please join me in a big round of applause for those who have stood by you throughout the years and who are with you today in person or in spirit-- your loving parents and dear friends. Let's give them a hand.

[APPLAUSE]

Now you are free, free of the pressure of exams, free to begin the next stage of your life, and free to pay back your student loans. I wish you well. I once sat where you sit today. Sharing these joyous moments with you today in Killian Court takes me back to more than a quarter of a century to my own studies at MIT. As a Sloan fellow, I learned--

[APPLAUSE]

As a Sloan fellow--

[CHEERS]

I'm going to get away from that. I learned management skills that I draw on still today in refashioning the United Nations for the new century that is upon us. But I learned to an even more important lesson. At the outset, there was competition, rather intense competition, among my cohorts. Each was equally determined to shine and to demonstrate his leadership skills. I say his, because there were no women among us, and I'm certainly glad that has changed.

[APPLAUSE]

Walking along the Childs River one day in the middle of my first term, I reflected on my predicament. How could I survive, let alone thrive, in this group of overachievers? And the answer came to me most emphatically. Not by playing it according to their rules. Follow your own inner compass, I said to myself. Listen to your own drummer. To live is to choose, but to choose well, you must know who you are, what you stand for, where you want to go, and why you want to get there. My anxiety slowly began to dissolve.

What I took away from MIT as a result was not only the analytical tools, but also the intellectual confidence to help me locate my bearings in new situations, to view any challenge as a potential opportunity for a renewal and growth, and to be comfortable in seeking the help of colleagues, but not fearing in the end to do things my way.

When the world thinks of MIT alumnae and alumni, who have gone on to assume positions of visibility in their respective fields, as so many have, it correctly imagines Nobel laureates in physics, chemistry, economics, or business tycoons or engineers improving our daily lives in countless ways. But as Secretary General of the United Nations, that's hardly the first answer anyone would blurt out on a TV quiz show.

And yet, it is not as much of a stretch as it may seem at first. For the ethos of science and engineering, shares deep and profound similarities with the 20th century project of international organization. Science and international organization alike are constructs of reason engaged in a permanent struggle against the forces of unreason. Science and international organization alike are experimental. Both learn by trial and error and strive to be self-correcting. Lastly, science and international organization alike speak a universal language and seek universal truths.

Allow me to expand briefly on each of these features of the project of international organization. I begin with the struggle between reason and unreason. When the history of the 20th century is written, the struggle will figure very prominently in it. On the plane of international affairs, the outburst of unreason in this century surpassed in horror and human tragedy any the modern world has seen in the entire modern era.

From Flanders fields to the Holocaust and the aggression that produced World War II, from the killing fields of Cambodia and Rwanda to ethnic cleansing in Bosnia, from the 25 million refugees who roam the world today to untold millions, many of them children, who died a slow death of starvation or are maimed for life by land mines our century, even this generation, has much to answer for. But we have also managed to build up the international edifice of reason.

By deliberate institutional means, we have better positioned humankind to cope with the present global problems. Measures to enhance peace and security rank among these accomplishments. As the 21st century draws to a close, we can take pride in numerous advances in, for example, the area of arms control and disarmament. Perhaps, the bedrock is the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, in force for nearly three decades now.

Negotiated through the United Nations and monitored by one of its agencies, the NPT has more adherents than any arms controls treaty in history. In September, 1996, the United Nations General Assembly approved the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, which has since been signed by more than 140 countries, including all five nuclear weapons states. In April of this year, we witnessed the entry into force of the Chemical Weapons Convention. It helps to ensure that the vile weapons never again will be the scourge of any battle field, the silent but certain doom of any civilian population.

Finally, states that are party to the Biological Weapons Convention are seeking ways to reinforce its authority through a verification mechanism. Much remains to be done, especially in reducing the vast and rapidly growing flow of conventional weapons, ridding the world of the viciousness of landmines, whose primary targets are the innocents of any conflict, strengthening the methods of preventive diplomacy, and inventing the next generation of peacekeeping operations.

But only a decade ago, the achievements I have illuminated seemed unimaginable. Now they are real. Similar accomplishments are transforming other aspects of international life. Few are more noble than safeguarding and enhancing human rights. Few yield more practical benefits than deepening and expanding multilateral rules for international economic relations. Few are more rewarding than helping the world's children to achieve healthy and productive lives. Few are more critical than preserving the human environment, even as we achieve greater economic opportunity for all.

And so as this century draws to a close, we are justified in concluding that international organization has helped tilt the balance to what the domain within which the power reason prevails. A second attribute that the project of international organization shares with science is experimental method. Indeed, international organization is an experiment. It is an experiment in human cooperation on a planetary scale. Those of us who serve in international organizations must never forget the fact that they are not an end in themselves. They are the means to empower both governments and people to realize goals through collaboration that would otherwise elude them.

International organizations, therefore, must closely be attuned to the environment, quickly correct their mistakes, build cumulatively on their achievements, and constantly generate new modalities as previous ways of doing things become outdated. I am very pleased, therefore, to report to you today that we at the United Nations are amidst the most thoroughgoing institutional reforms ever attempted there. I would go a step further and express my conviction that when our reform plans are announced--

[HELICOPTER FLYING]

Sorry, we'll let it. I would go further and express my conviction that when our reform plans are announced next month, they will compare favorably with any search reform yet undertaken by any public sector anywhere. We seek a United Nations that will view change as a friend, not change for its own sake, but change that permits us to do more good by doing it better.

We seek a United Nations that is leaner, more focused, more flexible, and more responsive to change and global needs. We seek a United Nations that is organized around its core competencies vis a vis other international organizations and ever more robust global civil society. We seek a United Nations that serves more effectively not only its member states, but also the people of the world whose hopes we embody.

In short, we at the United Nations are working hard to firm up the grounds on which the project of international organization rests. And we are doing so by recognizing its experimental nature, and then raising the imperative of inventiveness that it implies. The third similarity between the ethos of science and the project of international organization is this. We do what we do in the realm of international organization, because we strive in our own fashion to give expression to universal truths. What might these be in so contested an arena as international affairs?

I believe that they include the truce of human dignity and fundamentally quality, whereby a child born in the smallest village of the poorest land is valued as much as the one born on Beacon Hill. I believe they include a yearning for peace, the awareness that we are but stewards of this extraordinary only one earth, the understanding that even though the world is divided by many particularisms, we are united as human community.

This noble course requires your help. All of you in the class of 1997, wherever you go from here, and whatever you do in the future, you will participate in a world that is becoming increasingly globalized. You will interact directly and indirectly with others just like you across the far reaches of the world. They will represent colleagues, competitors, customers. As you enter this new world, I call upon you to remember this. As powerful and as progressive a bond that market rationality constitutes, it is not a sufficient basis for human solidarity.

[APPLAUSE]

It must be coupled with an ethic of caring for those whom the market disadvantages, an ethic of responsibility for the collective goals that the marketplace underproduces, an ethic for tolerance for those whom the market pits as your adversary. The United Nations has no peer in this regard. It is the unparalleled nerve center of the global village, exploring and negotiating emerging issues, certain priorities, and creating norms of conduct.

Since the 1970s, the United Nations has been at the forefront of instituting concern with the human environment, world population, world hunger, the extension of fundamental human rights to encompass the status of women and of children, as well as sustainable development in as many facets. We have done so through a series of global conferences that have brought together governments and nongovernmental organizations from every corner of the world.

By means of this novel form of multilateral diplomacy, the universal truths of which I spoke slowly but steadily are making themselves heard. Slowly but steadily they are stretching the we. In the we the peoples of the United Nations, as the opening words of our charter put it, not at the expense of you or me, or of this or that country, but in the fulfillment of that which we share in common.

Moreover, most of you here today are citizens of this great and bountiful United States of America. For you, I have a special plea. Your country, the world's most powerful, even now, is debating its future role in the new world community and their place of the United Nations within that overall foreign policy vision. I call upon you to work tirelessly to anchor the United States firmly to the course of internationalism, to its historic mission as an agent of progressive change, to a world order that reflects your own country's commitment to the rule of law, equal opportunity, the irreducibility of rise of all individuals.

The need is pressing, and the moment is now. Let us continue the productive partnership between the United States and the United Nations and go forward together with a positive can-do attitude to win peace and prosperity that beckons. Thank you, Mr. President, honored guest, and most of all, my fellow alumnae and alumni. Yes, I can call you that now. Good luck.

[APPLAUSE]