

#MakeVirtueViral: A Graduation Speech for Uncertain Times by Nipun Mehta

In his address to the 2016 class at DRBU, ServiceSpace founder Nipun Mehta makes a case for the power of stilling the mind, deepening awareness and practicing what he calls the 3 S's: small, service, and surrender. Framed in the context of a rapidly changing world that privileges money, fame and power, his talk is riddled with inspiring counter examples. Drawing on insights from revolutionary Do-Nothing farmer Masanobu Fukuoka, Sufi parables, stories from the White House, a bowing monk and more, Mehta's words serve as a clarion call back to humanity's universal values. Below is the transcript.

Thank you, all. Thank you, President Susan Rounds, Bhikshuni Heng Chih and distinguished faculty and board of DRBU. And Ven. Hsuan Hua, who had the incredible foresight to create such an incubator of wisdom. Many years ago, I remember being moved to tears when I first read the journals of two Buddhist monks who undertook a bowing pilgrimage -- three-steps, one-bow for 800 miles. With a mission to bring peace in their hearts and the world, they were destined for a place called City of Ten Thousand Buddhas. Reading the descriptions of this city, it sounded like an almost mythical realm. To be standing here today, and that too in the presence of those very same bowing monks -- Rev. Heng Sure and Marty Verhoeven -- is just a tremendous honor for me. Well, technically, Rev. Heng Sure isn't here but I'm sure he's live-streaming from Australia, so we can count that. :) And what a joy and privilege it is to be able to congratulate you, the DRBU class of 2016, on your commencement day. I know we try to practice detachment, but I think it's safe to make an exception today and celebrate all of your hard work. Congratulations! You made it to the finish line. :)

Over these past years, all of you have been immersed in the study of virtue, in its many forms, across many different traditions. From Plato to Confucius, Nagarjuna to Darwin, Kant to Lao Tsu, your academic studies have spanned the Great Books from the West and timeless classics from the East.

Today, on your commencement day, I want to say the world needs you, students of virtue, more than ever. Your formal education may have ended, but the lifelong work of applying these insights is just about to start. Today's society has no shortage of information for the head, but what we lack sorely is application of our hands and cultivation of our hearts. What the world needs today is a resurgence of virtue. In the glitz and glam of our endless desires, we have forgotten the hands-head-heart embodiment of these values.

To put it another way -- the world needs your help to make virtue go viral.

If you look up news of the most promising innovations of the day, it won't be long before you run into the latest buzzword: artificial intelligence. In 15 years, our fastest computer will perform more operations per second than all the neurons in all the brains of

all the people who are alive in the world. Imagine that! Already, we have driverless cars on the road, machines churning out award-nominated novels, and robots managing entire hotels. Elon Musk, has ominously described AI's development as "summoning the demon" -- and he's one of the pioneers of the field! Esteemed scientist Stephen Hawking warns us that it could "spell the end of the human race". The problem, of course, isn't inherently technology. It is that we have reduced the vast scope of human ingenuity to what sells in the marketplace. We have taken the multidimensional gift of human connection and reduced it to a bunch of self maximizing transactions.

It's not that we have forgotten about our true values, but rather that we are fumbling in the wrong places to find them.

There is a famous Sufi story of Mulla Nasruddin, who lost his keys one night. As he's searching for them on the side of the road, a few neighbors join in to help. After a fruitless search, one of them asks, "Mulla, where exactly did you drop the keys?" "Oh, inside my house." The shocked neighbor responds, "Then why in the world are we searching for them under this lamp post?" Not missing a beat, Mulla replies -- "Oh, because there's more light here."

That, in a nutshell, is our problem too. Today's society wants us to inherit the value system of the marketplace. Fall in line, and we'll be rewarded with fancy titles on business cards, alphabets after our name, and dollars in our bank account. The shiny carrots of money, fame and prestige may grab our attention but we're not going to find our keys under those glittering lights. Because that is not where we lost them. The keys to deep-rooted and sustainable happiness -- have, and always will lie, within ourselves.

In our mad rush for artificial intelligence, we are forgetting about plain, human intelligence -- let alone wisdom. We've forgotten that we are creatures capable of generosity, compassion, forgiveness and a vast array of other virtues.

Outer engineering won't get us there. It will have to be inner transformation.

Sure, innovations like AI may augment our labor, and even our creative activity, but no robot will ever be responsible for the resurgence of virtue. Making virtue go viral is an unassailable human responsibility. It will always be an inside job.

By taking on these challenges, make no mistake, you will be swimming against society's current. But you'll also be in flow with the deepest laws of nature.

Now I know commencement speakers are typically supposed to inspire you to make a splash in the world, be somebody, do something big and important. But this isn't a typical university, and you're not a typical class. So I'm trusting I won't get in trouble for this next piece of advice.

Learn the art of doing nothing.

Doing nothing gets a bad rap in our world today. We equate it with laziness and inactivity. Think lounging on your couch with a bag of chips watching TV. That's not what we are talking about here, because that's just physical inertia. The question we need to start asking is -- what is our mind doing in each moment? If it's endlessly running on the hamster wheel of unconscious habits and thought patterns, then doing something can be just as, if not more, useless as lazing on your couch. In fact, this itch to act can often be detrimental to our individual and collective well-being. Martin Luther King Jr. himself

warned us about this when he said, "Be careful not to mistake activity for progress." We know the truth of this from experience -- think about how we fill the void in conversation with empty chatter, or how we fill a blank space in our schedule with refreshing our Facebook feeds (150 times per day, researchers say!). I remember a friend once asking me, "Nipun, information overload is killing me. Can you suggest a meditation app?" My immediate thought was, "Yes, it's called the off button." It's hard to resist doing something. :)

If doing something is like the lines in a drawing, doing nothing is white space on the page. If doing something is like singing a remarkable song, doing nothing is the silence in between the notes. If doing something is people holding hands in a circle, then doing nothing is the empty space that is held in the center.

If we do something without understanding what it means to do nothing, then what we create is chaos, not harmony.

Perhaps no one knew this better than a small-scale Japanese farmer named Masanobu Fukuoka.

Around the time of WW2, he was sitting under a tree one day when, in a flash, he had a realization that everything produced by the mind is inherently false. Inspired, he went around trying to share this insight with others -- and failed miserably. No one understood. Instead of giving up, this young man did something that at first glance seemed bizarre, but turned out to be brilliant. He turned his hand to farming. In doing so, he was choosing to manifest his insights in a way that everyday people could relate to.

So Fukuoka took over his father's barren farm, and started experimenting with a technique he called "Do Nothing farming". By this, he meant that he would strive to minimize his physical footprint on the farm. "Let nature grow the plants," he said. And his job was to get out of the way, as much as possible. In his farming context, Fukuoka specified precisely what 'do nothing' meant -- no weeding, no tilling, no fertilizers, and no pesticides. This didn't mean he just sat around all day. Far from it. He often joked that 'doing nothing' was really hard work.

Getting out of the way, figuring out the minimal intervention, is an extremely difficult task. One has to first become aware of all the relationships in the ecosystem, and then use that information alongside insight and intuition, to tune into the perfect acupuncture points that can trigger massive ripple effects.

Ultimately, the proof is in the pudding. For a farmer, this means yields must be high, and the produce better be good. And for Fukuoka it surely was. People flew across the world just to taste his apples. And no surprise, since his were no ordinary, mono-cropped apples. In fact, Fukuoka's farm didn't look like a farm at all; it looked more like a jungle, unorganized and wild. In "doing nothing", Fukuoka was simply holding space for all the complex parts of the ecosystem to connect organically and find a natural equilibrium. In every bite of a Fukuoka apple, what you were tasting wasn't just the richness of that one apple, or even that one apple tree, but the immense contributions of the entire ecosystem, that were all invisibly connected below the surface.

I personally didn't know about Fukuoka's example until much later in my journey, but I found immediate parallels with the way in which ServiceSpace tended to the "social field". In place of plants and trees, we had people. In the place of the soil, we had our minds. In place of fruits, what grew were acts of service.

While we have applied the do-nothing principles in the work of ServiceSpace, there is no reason why we can't design our relationships, our technologies, our institutions, and our communities -- and perhaps even our own enlightenment -- in this way. These principles are timeless and universal, and create virtuous cycles wherever they are found. In working this way, we've learned that an ecosystem is always greater than the sum of its parts.

When I graduated from college, I didn't know I could opt-out of all the typical do-something questions. I didn't know that when someone asks, "What do you do?", it's okay to be undefined. I still don't know what to write on that customs form where they have a fill-in-the-blank for profession. But what I do know is that to the question of "How much are you worth?" it's okay to include non-financial forms of capital -- like gratitude -- in your answer. To the question of what is your ten year plan, it's okay to say I don't know. As the Zen master Shunryu Suzuki once remarked, it is only when you don't know that you are open to infinite possibilities. And remember, the value of your human life will always be more than the sum of your resume.

Today, as you navigate the nuances of your own journey, I want to leave you with three S's of do-nothing design that have served as guides in my life.

SMALL is the first S. Focusing on small invites us to let go of outcomes and fully inhabit the present. When we orient ourselves towards small acts and small effects, we learn to ride the ripple effect.

Few years ago, I remember my aunt telling me a story of an accident she was in, on highway 101. The car spun around 180 degrees, slammed against the center divider, her windshield was broken, and her 1 year old daughter in a car seat was screaming. As she tried to gather herself, a gentleman in another car stopped and came by her window: "Mam are you okay?" "I've just called 911, but it would be great if you could if you help find my glasses, so I can see more clearly." Her glasses had flown and he did help her find them. In between, he got a phone call -- "Honey, I can't talk right now," he said and continued helping. Then he got another phone call, "Honey, I'll call you back." By this time, the cops were on the way, and things had settled a bit. When he got a third phone call, and he said, "Honey, I'll be there soon", my aunt said, "Looks like you really need to be somewhere. Why don't you go ahead? We'll be okay now." And that man replies, "Well, it's my daughter's sixth birthday, and they're waiting for me to cut the cake. But you know, mam, if that was my daughter in the back, I'd hope that someone would stop to take care of you till you're okay." He stayed till the cops came.

It was a beautiful act, but if you were to ask my aunt, it's most powerful effect wasn't on her or her daughter. It was on someone who wasn't even on the scene -- my uncle. My uncle can never, ever pass a stranded vehicle without thinking of how a stranger stopped to help his family, once. And all those he helps will help others, and the chain will continue.

Today's dominant paradigm wires us to think big, control life, get noticed. But don't weigh yourself down with thinking big. Small is beautiful, because small connects. What you give up in the impact and scale of the action, you will gain in awareness and understanding of interconnections. That awareness, combined with skillfulness, will allow you to tap into the power of the ripple effect.

In ServiceSpace, we define this as a shift from leadership to laddership. A good ladder supports others in reaching greater heights of their potential. Bodhisattvas are perfect ladders. They race to the bottom of the pyramid instead of the top, they focus on the edges instead of the center. They work behind-the-scenes, not in the spotlight. If a ladder does his job right, no one will know to thank them, because it's almost impossible, sometimes even for the ladders themselves, to point to any single "special" thing that they've done. Their gift lies in being completely natural. Their many, small, natural acts work in concert with a greater emergence, and ripple out into incredible results. Results that are always aligned on the side of virtue.

SERVICE is the second S. With a heart of service, we can activate dormant connections and regenerate the field.

It is obvious that every act creates a relationship. But the quality of that relationship is predicated on the kind of intention behind it. If we act in the spirit of transaction or, worse, exploitation, that limits the scope of that connection. The relationship eventually crashes or fizzles out. But when a small act is selfless, it unleashes a regenerative effect that can build all the way into eternity.

Last year, I was asked to join President Obama's advisory council for addressing poverty and inequality. Quite an honor, and I was happy to serve. At our first White House meeting, we did an introductory circle around the question -- What gives you hope? Before I could think up something smart to say, it was already my turn to speak. And this is what spontaneously came to my mind, "Well, what gives me hope is love. What gives me hope is reading the NY Times story of how one person paid for coffee for the person behind her in line, and 226 people followed suit. Two hundred and twenty six people were voluntarily moved to pay it forward. What gives me hope is that life unfailingly responds to the advances of love."

When we act in service, we advance the cause of love. Life has no choice but to respond. Then, our egos no longer need to save the world. Our relationships, reinforced by our small acts of service, will naturally do this.

Gautama Buddha's attendant, Ananda, once asked him, "On this very long path, it seems like noble friends are half of the path." The Buddha replied: "No, Ananda, it is not half the path. It is the full path." Not 60 percent, not three quarters, not 90 percent. One hundred percent. In the tiniest act of service, we build an affinity -- and a field of these noble affinities, according to Buddha, is all we really need.

In today's networked world, you are all well aware of the quantity of connections -- but remember also to keep track of the quality of connections. Researchers inform us that in a room full of just 50 people, more than 100 million trillion unique connections are possible. A hundred million trillion, with just 50 people. Typically, that potential is never realized, because self-interest and agendas impose artificial constraints on the field. Imagine holding a space of compassion for all the living beings in your sphere of influence. Now imagine the potential of all living beings doing the same for each other.

SURRENDER is the third S. With small acts, we plant seeds; with a heart of service, we cultivate the field. But before the harvest is ready, there is one significant step: surrender.

In 2005, at what felt like the peak of our service work, my wife and I sold everything we had and embarked on a walking pilgrimage in India. Our intention was to cultivate renunciation. We arrived at the Gandhi Ashram, and walked South -- ended up being for

thousand kilometers. We would eat whatever food was offered, sleep wherever place was offered. Now, this is India in the summer months, sometimes with heat as high as 115 degrees. We might've just walked 30 miles the previous day, we might be hungry, we may not have slept in a comfortable place. Maybe someone was mean to us. Gazillion things could be wrong, but the thing that was the hardest was insecurity -- I could be eating the most nourishing meal, given with deepest love, but my mind would be racing ahead to security for tomorrow.

In so many profound ways, that pilgrimage was about surrender. People often think of surrender as a trust in "what goes around comes around." But feedback loops of karma are far more nuanced. Simply because you do an act of kindness doesn't mean you will be seeing an act of kindness the next day. The invitation is more about surrendering to the flow of life. Do we have the equanimity to receive all that life gives us -- the good, the bad, the ugly? Do we have the trust that any personal pain or pleasure is simply an offset for the larger equilibrium? Do we have a heart that is big enough to contain reward for someone else's toil and the consequences of someone else's mistake? These aren't questions that have answers. They are questions to be held with vigor, even in the most uncomfortable moments of life. And in the wake of that kind of surrender, T. S. Eliot's words come alive, "Wait, but wait without hope. Because hope could be hope for the wrong thing."

Our modern society is great at creating vertical solutions. A fitness movement to tackle obesity, a mindfulness movement to tackle stress, a green movement to tackle environmental degradation. But amidst these vertical solutions, I hope you will also bring to life the integrated power of emergence. A power that is born of surrender. Of learning to serve and then waiting with equanimity and trust. As we practice enough small acts of service, each resulting affinity helps weave a resilient fabric. Stronger than a trampoline. No matter what the setback, it is natural to bounce right back.

So, as you chart a path of virtue in the world, I hope that the power of three S's -- small, service and surrender -- stays with you.

I want to close with a small story. When I was about your age, about to make a big decision in my life, I remember running into Rev. Heng Sure in the hallways of the Berkeley monastery. We had a very casual and brief conversation, but he shared a line that has stayed with me since.

He said, "I have never regretted choosing a path that is hardest on my ego."

I've returned to that line many times, and today, I invite you, students of virtue, to not just take the road less traveled, but take it one step further. Take the road that is the least traveled, the road that is almost never taken, the road that is hardest on the ego.

All of you, the class of 2016, are bound to do great things in the world. Along the way, may your small acts of good unleash an unending ripple effect. May your heart of service be cradled in a cocoon of noble friendships. May your surrender make you an instrument of a greater emergence. And above all, may each of you build a field of virtue that will transform your life and light up our world.