

Embrace the Grace, Celebrate the Infinite by Nipun Mehta

What a great joy to be with you on this special day. Thank you, Dr. Carmen Valdes, Miss Ana Lim, distinguished staff and colleagues, and the larger Assumption family. And to you, the graduating class of 2018 -- congratulations! Assumption College might be the only place where two alumni have gone on to become president of the country, many alumni go on to become pioneering entrepreneurs, and numerous alumni go on to become nuns! What an honor to be here in a space that encourages such a wide spectrum of value for society.

Now, usually, commencement addresses are meant to affirm that you have the grit to conquer the world. But that's not sufficient for a class that chose its motto to be: "Trailblazers: Catalysts for Transformation". Trailblazers have to go one step further -- beyond conquering the known, they have to step into the unknown and embrace the infinite.

Today, I want to tell about three core values that have guided my path towards the unknown, but before I do that, let me first offer some context about my personal journey.

I have to admit that I came to "trailblazing" by accident, in a roundabout way. I grew up in the Silicon Valley, where innovators are constantly trying to "disrupt the world with exponential technology". Everything is exponential. In the span of a few decades, a computer chip the size of your fingernail can now fit 30 billion transistors. That's exponential processing power. In the last two years alone, we have recorded more data than in the entire human history. That's exponential data. We are now writing software that writes software. That's exponential intelligence. Radio took 38 years to reach 50 million users, and Android operating systems got there in a mere 18 months. That's exponential pace. And the point of all this exponential capacity is to do the impossible. Here's a quick snapshot of some headlines this month -- "Uber Announces Flying Taxi", "Robot Judges to Help With Court Cases", and "Gmail Will Now Auto-complete Whole Emails."

On the surface, this disruptive technology also invites us to be a trailblazer into the unknown. Think big, think fast, think impossible. You do it simply because you can. In many ways, I was a product of that culture. Yet, at some point in my early twenties, I shifted from what -- to why. That led me to apply that logic to a very different set of questions. What do exponential love, exponential forgiveness, and exponential kindness look like? Silicon Valley didn't have an answer for that, so I had to expand my search in other directions.

And I found something startling. I discovered that technology's quest towards the unknown requires us to accumulate more and more control, whereas growing in virtue requires an altogether different capacity: more and more surrender.

I remember, many years ago when I was a student at UC Berkeley, I was returning back from my computer science lab. It must've been 3:30AM. Feeling a bit groggy, I decided to go for a run. On my way home after the run, half-conscious half-sleepy, I found myself in a dark alley with an intimidating man staring at me in a distance. His hands were tucked underneath a newspaper, with what appeared to be a concealed weapon. All of a sudden, a thought paralyzed my mind, "I am going to get mugged." Fight or flight? I couldn't fight because the man was clearly much bigger than me, and I couldn't run because I was trapped in an alley. Only way out was through. And just in that moment, with fear running through my veins, I had this surprisingly magnanimous thought: "What if that was my brother? Before he even takes anything from me, I will just offer it with great love." In place of panic, a euphoric love overtook me. I felt giant. A man I saw as a threat now felt like my kin. As I passed him, I was no longer thinking fight or flight. Another way had just opened up -- love. Instead of avoiding eye contact, I looked him straight in the eye. I smiled. And to my utter surprise ... he smiled back. I reached home in safety.

Maybe nothing was going to happen that night, but after that experience, I knew it in my bones that love is a stronger force than fear. Yet, I could never tell anyone how it happened. Was it the gentleman, or the million other conditions that led me to be in that moment at that very time, with that very mindset?

In any moment, we have a choice in how we greet life. Either we meet it with a clenched fist or an open palm. Control or surrender. Either as a problem to be solved, or a mystery to be lived. Control was, and still is, very much in fashion. Society applauds us with affirmations like, "You really know what you're doing," or "You really know where you're headed." Yet, I have learned that it is an open palm that invites us to surrender to a dance with a much larger web of life.

As I initially practiced the art of surrender, I felt like I was letting go. But rather quickly, I saw that I was also letting come, letting "in". Without my asking, life offered with great abandon.

In my early twenties, I let go of my need to grow my bank balance, and I let in a capacity to grow my heart. That's how I started ServiceSpace. When I was 29 and embarked on a walking pilgrimage, I let go of my comforts and let in a far greater intelligence. When I let go transactions, I let in trust. In my early thirties, when I got married and let go of my independence, I let in the beauty of interdependence. Not having charged for my labor for more than fifteen years, I learned that in letting go of price-tags, I let in -- the priceless.

Surrender isn't a sacrifice of the known, but rather a celebration of the infinite. Sooner or later, you see the futility of fitting the glorious spectrum of our human experience into a neat little algorithm. Then, you no longer try to scheme deals with nature. When the ego moves from the driver's seat to the passenger seat, you not only enjoy the ride but become aware of the vast conspiracy of the universe to drop us at the doorsteps of greater good. With an effortless bow, you let go that which is leaving, and let in all that arrives.

Such a grand mystery of life is not meant to be traced backward. It must be lived forward.

Today, I want to leave you with three qualities, three G's, that have lighted my journey in living it forward.

The First G is Generosity.

The best part about generosity is that we don't need to learn it. We simply need to unlearn greed. Science confirms that we are innately wired to give, even before we learn about words and concepts. Every time we give, we experience a "helpers high" as our bodies release oxytocin, dopamine, endorphins, and serotonin; our immunity improves, stress decreases, social relations deepen, life expectancy ramps up. Let alone helping others, just witnessing acts of kindness releases biochemicals in our body that make us happy. British researchers have even shown that a single smile, just one smile, can provide the same level of brain stimulation as eating loads of chocolate. (Okay, maybe I won't share that with my wife. :))

St. Francis of Assisi, of course, illuminated this principle long time back: "It is in giving that we receive." And perhaps in receiving, we keep paying it forward in an unending virtuous cycle. The more you give, the more you want to give.

The biggest barrier to giving is a cultural one. Back in 2005, my wife and I went on a walking pilgrimage across India, where, for a thousand kilometers, our survival depended entirely on the kindness of strangers. It was a life-changing experience. Yet, one of the most commonly asked questions we used to get was, "You don't have anything. How can you give?" And I would counter question, "Does that mean I was born bankrupt? That first I have to accumulate to give?" Clearly, that's an absurd proposition. We practiced generosity by helping an old man lift his haystack, picking up litter on the streets, listening to people's struggles, telling stories to the village gatherings.

To adapt Rumi's quote, "There are a thousand ways to kneel and serve the world." It doesn't require learning anything new. We just need to listen to our inner voice.

Just a few months ago, we held a retreat with people who were differently-abled. Some were visually impaired, some were deaf, some couldn't speak, some on the autism spectrum, some in a wheelchair. It was a truly remarkable experience, but what particularly stood out for me was a coffee break. "Friends, we have about 15 minutes to go out and grab a drink," the organizers announced. The only catch was that we were all going to be blindfolded. All of a sudden, murmurs of chaos spread across the room. Most of us in the room had no experience of walking without vision. And then ... almost as if on cue, the blind among us took the lead. "Hey, we can get you through this. Just hold onto to the person next to you." They knew exactly where the other experienced blind folks were located, where the door was, where we needed to get the drinks. Everything. Someone even ensured that special care was given to those in wheelchairs, who were doubly constricted. And just like that, a phenomenal human chain appeared. I say appeared because it was completely spontaneous. "Step, step, step", instructions were given, as the murmurs spread from person to person, across the entire chain. Not only did we get our drinks, we returned back with ample time to spare.

My dear Trailblazers, go create that human chain of generosity. Know that the size and the type of giving make no difference; what matters most is that we respond to our innate call to give and connect.

Second G is Grace.

With each act of giving, we create a silent affinity with those who receive our offerings. Over time, those individual strands form an intricate web of interconnections. As we learn to trust the intelligence of that field of blessings, grace grows.

The beauty of grace is that it comes unannounced, in the most unsuspecting ways.

First time I got to be on TV, right after I started ServiceSpace in my twenties, was a live-interview on CNN International. You always wonder, "How do people get on CNN?" It turns out, they just email you. And you write back. So I did, and I had this interview. On the way to my hour-long drive to the interview, it so happened that my car engine, in the middle of the freeway, just died. The engine just shuts off. I mean, you know your car is going to die at some point, but you just wouldn't figure it would happen on your way to your first TV interview on CNN! And did I mention it was LIVE?! So here we were. I rolled the car into the emergency lane, and we called my Dad who rushed out to get us. It was unclear if we were going to actually make it on time, as my brother and I sat silently in the emergency lane. Just as I was watching my breath -- going in and going out -- I noticed a little flower blooming in the cracks of the highway. "If it was any other moment," I thought to myself, "I would think that flower was beautiful."

And just then, I asked myself, "Why not now? What's wrong with this moment?" In a flash, I realized that none of this was my show. I didn't start this organization, I didn't ask to get on TV, I don't have any interest in growing the movement. It's all emerged. So why worry now? All of a sudden, I felt like an instrument. Almost as if a spigot was opened, all my anxiety flushed out. I relaxed, looked at the flower and smiled. It really was beautiful. Turns out I made it in time for the interview, barely -- holding the paradox of emptiness and fullness, humility and confidence, I felt like a million bucks, and the interview created remarkable ripples for the future of ServiceSpace.

Despite such experiences, however, when I was in college, I lived as if 90% of life is earned through my effort. Sure, there was this 10% of unexplained serendipity, but that felt incidental. My emphasis was on my effort. I worked very hard in school, once taking 40 units a semester in college -- more than a dozen classes! Aiming to play professional tennis, I put in so many hours on the tennis courts that my coach would often tell me, "Nipun, don't try so hard." Perhaps in subconscious ways, I was trying to earn brownie points from society -- a society that gives accolades for how much we win, how much we know, how much we accumulate, how much we control.

Today, however, after all these years of effort, I feel that I had my ratios mixed up. I see ninety percent, perhaps even more, of life as a result of inexplicable grace.

Recently, I was walking down the streets and found a five dollar bill. It made me think about my relationship to something I hadn't exactly earned. It so happened, that a young person emailed me that very day and asked, "What advice would you give your 16-year-old self?" I wrote this paragraph in response:

You will be taught to work hard, to drive your destiny, to make something of your precious life. That's valuable, but don't forget that underneath the waves of your effort lie the undefinable laws of the ocean. Listen carefully because these laws won't be as loud as the commercials on TV; they will instead whisper with the poetry of serendipity. That five dollar bill you find on the streets, don't ignore it just because you haven't earned it. Respect it. When reverence becomes the crucible for subtlest accidents of life, grace will be the sunshine that will wake you up every morning. Grace isn't deserved or undeserved, understandable or mysterious, pain or pleasure. It simply is -- and it is aligned with the laws of nature. May you live a life of grace.

If we are willing to look, stalwarts of such grace are all around us.

Mother Teresa, for example, used to run 400 centers in 102 countries around the globe. But she never kept any cash reserves. None. One of my friends, Lynne Twist, was very close to Mother and asked about her fundraising strategy. Mother simply smiled and said, "I just know how to pray." Now, by conventional means, here was a CEO of a large operation, telling us that she doesn't know how the money was coming in. And she's not worried in the slightest! She's not worried, because she is an instrument of nature. Her strength comes not from what she knows, but from her surrender that begets an ongoing grace. In her own words, "I am but a pencil in the hands of God."

My dear trailblazers, go become a pencil in the hands of the universe. Genius is typically seen as a static property of an individual, but what these wisdom keepers teach us is that it actually flows dynamically. The flute offers us a melody, precisely because it is hollow. Be that empty instrument so genius to flow through you.

Third G is Gratitude.

With generosity, we build the field; with grace, we trust in the intelligence of the field's interconnections; and lastly, with gratitude, we become aware of the field. We see that, in fact, everything is a gift.

I've had the privilege of knowing a 92-year-old Benedictine monk, Brother David Steindl-Rast. One time, incidentally when we ran into him on the streets of Assisi, we engaged in a deep conversation over dinner. "Is it true, Brother David, that you don't ask for anything, as a general practice?" I asked. "Yes," he replied. "St. Benedict established the order with a clear teaching: Ask nothing, refuse nothing." One of the principles of ServiceSpace also is to not fundraise, to not seek in that way. Inspired by its direct resonance with ServiceSpace principles, I inquired, "Brother David, you've been practicing this for *sixty* years. What have you learned from this practice?" He responded, "Well, you learn to be in the present moment and to be grateful for what you receive." "But what if what you receive is suffering?" He smiles and says, "That's not possible. You may experience pain, but suffering is always optional."

All too often, we reserve gratitude for circumstances that end in our favor. But what Brother David is pointing us to, is a far deeper wisdom. Our aliveness is a measure of our awareness that everything -- the good, the bad and the ugly -- is a gift. Even in those moments of suffering, where we forget that a caterpillar struggles only to become a butterfly, there is a grander goodness that cradles our existence.

One of my very dear friends is a guy named Pancho, who is involved in many grassroots causes. A few years ago, at the Occupy movement, when there was a risk of violence, he decided, as he says, "to step up his non-violence." He started meditating in front of City hall in Oakland to bring some calm energy to the chaos. However, the police didn't see his intention and arrested him. When they arrested him, his offense ironically read, "Disturbing peace."

In the prison, when they shackled him he up, he looks to the woman doing her job, and says, "Sister, you're too beautiful to be doing this work." The woman breaks down. In his jail cell, his motion was restricted. Lights are constantly on. Every hour, the door would slam open for a check-up. The bathroom is right in the corner of your cell. It was downright filthy. In short, a pretty dehumanizing place. On top of it, he's a vegan so the only food he could eat was an orange. So, in four days there, he had four oranges.

Yet, he saw it all as a gift. He felt grateful and wanted to pay it forward. At one point, the

prison guards gave him a pouch with a toothbrush and few basic amenities including a small paper and pencil. The next day, the prison guard sees him sitting quietly with his eyes closed and a smile on his face. "Hey, what are you doing?" they ask him. "Just self-care," he says. By the next day, the guards are used to that and come by to take a selfie. :) On the third day, Pancho, who has befriended the guards, simply by the virtue of his gentle peace, asks the guard: "Hey, can I get another one of those pouches?" They obliged him. And on Day 4, before he's about to be released, Pancho, with all his constraints, cleans up the whole cell and on that extra piece of paper, he writes: "Dear Brother, you don't know me but I want you to know that I love you. I was in the jail cell before you, and I cleaned it for you. Now you're it. If you're so moved, you can also do the same the person who comes after you."

No matter what the circumstance -- even if we're our hands are tied up and we've been in prison with one orange a day -- we can always find a heart of gratitude.

Our entire existence is indeed a gift. Scientists now tell us that during the Big Bang, a finite supply of cobalt was generated. Were it not for this cobalt, human beings simply couldn't exist. From cobalt in our bodies to the blood in our veins to oxygen in our every breath, how can we ever pay back our debts of gratitude?

We can't pay back. But we sure can pay it forward.

My dear Trailblazers, go shower the world with your gratitude. Not just a superficial gratitude when nature aligns itself with your plans, but an unconditional gratitude for the mere joy of being alive.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, the world you are inheriting is a bit wounded. But it's nothing that your creativity can't handle. While the media invites us to take refuge in narratives of greed and grit, I hope you will remember the gentle power of generosity, grace, and gratitude -- and how they strengthen each other into a virtuous cycle that can heal us.

You are our great hope to midwife humanity to its next plateau. We expect today's leaders to have answers, but trailblazers, I hope you will also have profound questions. We expect today's leaders to be in control, but trailblazers, I hope you will also abide in the strength of surrender. We expect today's leaders to be great speakers, but trailblazers, I hope you will also become great listeners to grace. We are calling on you, the next generation of women leaders, to create a radically new field initiated by your acts of generosity, to activate that grace borne of our invisible interconnections, and to pay it forward with a heart of unconditional gratitude. We are calling on you, the next generation of women leaders, to initiate a resurgence of the divine feminine to balance the divine masculine.

Surely, there will be challenges. Riding the waves of the unknown, and heading towards a future that we cannot yet imagine is hardly a trivial task. You will be tempted by the insatiable powers of the ego; you will have to confront not just the outer status-quo, but the inner status-quo that resists transformation. And yet if you lived in love and in service, there will always be a community to remind of the song you have come here to play.

There is a legend of a tribe in Africa where the birth date of a child is counted not from

when they were born, nor even conceived but from the day that the child was a thought in its mother's mind. When a woman decides that she will have a child, she goes off and sits under a tree, by herself, and listens until she can hear the song of the child that wants to come.

And when the mother is pregnant, she teaches that child's song to the women of the village, so that when the child is born, they will welcome her with that song.

And when the child goes through the rites of puberty, they come together to sing that song.

And when the child falls, or hurts its knee, they will pick it up and remind her of the song.

And when the child crowns a noble achievement, they will celebrate with that song.

And if ever ... along the way ... the child gets swept up in the world and loses her way, the villagers will come together and remind her of her song.

And finally, when the child passes away, they will honor her life by singing the song.

So, Assumption Class of 2018, I hope you will sing your song of love, loud and clear, with unabashed courage and conviction. As you stand on the precipice of a new dawn, may the bounty of generosity, the winds of grace, and the poise of gratitude power your acts of service. And no matter what happens, please keep singing -- and reminding the world of its song.

Thank you. And congratulations!