

## Miserable & Magical: A Graduation Speech for Paradoxical Times by Nipun Mehta

[When the student body of an elite private school in Silicon Valley was given the chance to vote on who would give their graduation address this year, they chose a man named Nipun Mehta. An unexpected choice for these teenagers, who belong to what Time magazine called the "Me Me Me Generation". Nipun's journey is the antithesis of self-serving. More than a decade ago, he walked away from a lucrative career in high-tech, to explore the connection between inner change and external impact. ServiceSpace, the nonprofit he founded, has now drawn over 450,000 members across the globe. In this electrifying address that garnered a standing ovation, he calls out the paradoxical crisis of disconnection in our hyper-connected world -- and offers up three powerful keys that hold the antidote. Below is the recently released video followed by the transcript that went viral online.]

Thank you Jennifer Gargano, Chris Nikoloff and the entire faculty at Harker. To you, the class of 2013, congratulations! I'm delighted to be with you on your special day, and it is a particular honor since I know you chose your speaker.

So, graduation day is here and this once-in-a-lifetime milestone moment has arrived. In the words of Taylor Swift, I can tell how you're feeling: "happy, free, confused, and lonely, miserable and magical at the same time." Who would've thought we'd be quoting words of wisdom from Taylor Swift at your commencement. :)

Today, I'm here with some good news and bad news. I'll give you the good first.

You might be surprised to hear this, but you are about to step out into a world that's in good shape -- in fact the best shape that that it's ever been in. The average person has never been better fed than today. Infant mortality has never been lower; on average we're leading longer, healthier lives. Child labor, illiteracy and unsafe water have ceased to be global norms. Democracy is in, as slavery is disappearing. People don't have to work as hard to just survive. A bicycle in 1895 used to cost 260 working hours, today we've gotten that number down to 7.2.

So, things are progressing. But I'm afraid that's not the full story. You'll want to brace yourselves, because this is the bad news part.

This week, Time Magazine's cover story labeled you guys as the "Me, Me, Me" generation; the week before, NY Times reported that the suicide rate for Gen X went up by 30% in the last decade, and 50% for the boomer generation. We've just learned that atmospheric carbon levels surpassed 400 PPM for the first time in human history. Our honeybee colonies are collapsing, thereby threatening the future of our food supply. And all this is

just the tip of the iceberg.

What we're handing over to you is a world full of inspiring realities coupled with incredibly daunting ones. In other words: miserable and magical isn't just a pop-song lyric -- it's the paradox that you are inheriting from us.

So, what do you do with that? I'm going to be honest -- I don't really know. :) I do know this, though:

At the core of all of today's most pressing challenges is one fundamental issue: we have become profoundly disconnected.

Rather ironic, considering that we live in an era where Facebook has spawned 150 billion "connections", as we collectively shell out 4.5 billion likes on status updates, every single day. Yet, a growing body of science is showing what we already feel deep in our gut: we're more isolated than ever before. The average American adult reports having just one real friend that they can count on. Just one. And for the first time in 30 years, mental health disabilities such as ADHD outrank physical ones among American children.

Somehow we've allowed our relationship to gadgets and things to overtake our real-world ties.

We've forgotten how to rescue each other.

Yet, deep inside we all still have that capacity. We know we have it because we saw it at Sandy Hook, in the brave teachers who gave up their lives to save their students. We saw it during the Boston Marathon when runners completed the race and kept running to the nearest blood bank. We saw it just this week in Oklahoma when a waiter at a fast food chain decided to donate all his tips to the tornado relief efforts and triggered a chain of generosity.

So we know that we can tap into our inner goodness when crisis strikes. But can we do it on a run-of-the-mill Monday?

That's the question in front of you. Will you, class of 2013 step up to rebuild a culture of trust, empathy and compassion? Our crisis of disconnection needs a renaissance of authentic friendship. We need you to upgrade us from Me-Me-Me to We-We-We.

Reflecting on my own journey, there have been three keys that helped me return to a place of connection. I'd like to share those with you today, in the hope that perhaps it might support your journey.

### The First Key Is To Give

In the movie Wall Street -- which originally came out well before you guys were born -- there's a character named Gordon Gekko whose credo in life reads: Greed is good. When I was about your age, Silicon Valley was in the seductive grip of the dot-com boom. It was a time when it was easy to believe that Greed was Good. But a small group of us had a different hypothesis:

\*Maybe\* greed is good, but Generosity is better.

We tested that hypothesis. When I started ServiceSpace, our first project was to build websites for nonprofits at no charge. We ended up building and gifting away thousands of sites, but that wasn't our main goal. Our real purpose was to practice generosity.

In the early days, the media was pretty sure we had a hidden agenda. "We're doing this just to practice giving with no strings attached," we said. The few who actually believed us didn't think we could sustain it. The thing is -- we did. A decade later, when our work started attracting millions of viewers, entrepreneurs told us that we'd be crazy to not slap on ads or try to monetize our services. The thing is -- we didn't. We probably *were* a bit crazy. And when we started Karma Kitchen, people really thought "No way!" It was a restaurant where your check always read zero, with this note: "Your meal is paid for by someone before you, and now it's your chance to pay it forward." The thing is -- 25 thousand meals later, the chain continues in several cities around the globe.

People consistently underestimate generosity, but human beings are simply wired to give.

In one study at Harvard, scientists surprised a couple hundred volunteers with an unexpected monetary reward and gave them the choice of keeping it or giving it away. The only catch was that they had to make the decision spontaneously. Lo and behold, the majority chose --- to give away the money! Greed, it turns out, is a calculated after thought. Our natural instinct is, and always has been -- to give.

When you take Econ 101 in college, you will learn that all of economics is rooted in the assumption that people aim to maximize self-interest. I hope you don't just take that for granted. I hope you challenge it. Consider the likes of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. and Mother Teresa who have rocked the history of our planet with the exact opposite assumption, with the belief in the goodness of our human nature.

Or consider Ruby Bridges.

Six-year-old Ruby was the first African American girl to go to an all-white school on Nov 14, 1960. All the teachers refused to teach her, except for one Mrs. Henry. Ruby received constant death threats and on the way to class every day, people would line up to shout and throw things. Mrs. Henry instructed Ruby to not speak to anyone, as she crossed the jeering crowds every day. But one day, she saw Ruby saying something, so she said, "Ruby, I told you not to speak to anyone." "No, Mrs. Henry, I didn't say anything to them." "Ruby, I saw you talking. I saw your lips moving." "Oh, I was just praying. I was praying for them," Ruby responded. Then she recited her prayer, and I quote "Please, God, try to forgive these people. Because even if they say those bad things, they don't know what they're doing."

A six year old! Wishing well for those who were wishing her harm. How generous is that? And what does it say about the power of the human heart?

Our capacity to love is a currency that never runs out.

May each of you tap into that generous ocean and discover every day, what it means to give.

The Second Key Is To Receive

When we give, we think we are helping others. That's true, but we are also helping ourselves. With any act of unconditional service, no matter how small, our bio-chemistry changes, our mind quiets, and we feel a sense of gratefulness. This inner transformation fundamentally shifts the direction of our lives.

A couple summers ago, we had two 14-year-olds, Neil and Dillan, interning at ServiceSpace. One of their projects was a 30 day kindness challenge -- they had to come up with and do a different act of kindness every day for a month. In the beginning they had to plan "kindness activities", but slowly they learned how to spontaneously turn their daily life into a canvas for giving. Doing the dishes for mom without her asking, stopping to help a stranger with a flat tire, standing up for a bullied kid, gifting all their winnings at the arcade to a child.

Very quickly, kindness shifted from being an activity -- to a way of life.

It wasn't just about who they were helping, it was about who they themselves were becoming through the process. Last weekend, I happened to see Neil after a while, the day after Senior Prom and he had a story to share, "Last night I noticed that the dance floor was too small and a few of the special needs students just couldn't get on. So I grabbed a bunch of my friends, and we started dancing in a little circle around them. Everyone had a great time." Then, he paused for a reflective moment, and asked me, "But I felt so good about doing that. Do you think I was being selfish?"

What a profound question. What Neil experienced was the fact that when we give, we receive many times over.

Or as the Dalai Lama once put it, "Be Selfish, Be Generous." It is in giving that we receive.

When we think of generosity, we typically think of it as a zero sum game. If I give you a dollar, that's one less dollar for me. The inner world, though, operates with an entirely different set of rules. The boundaries aren't so easy to decipher. Your state of being inherently affects my state of being. This isn't feel-good talk. It's actual science. Research shows that, in close proximity, when people feel connected, their individual heart-beats actually start to synchronize -- even with zero physical contact. In neuroscience, the discovery of mirror neurons has shown us that we literally do feel each other's pain -- and joy.

And joy is *definitely* not a zero-sum game. The law of abundance says that if I give you a smile, that's not one less smile for me.

The more I smile, the more I *do* smile. The more I love, the more love I have to give. So, when you give externally, you receive internally. How do the two compare? That's a question only you can answer for yourself, and that answer will keep changing as your awareness deepens.

Yet this much is clear: if you only focus on the externals, you'll live your life in the deadening pursuit of power and products. But if you stay in touch with your inner truth, you will come alive with joy, purpose, and gratitude. You will tap into the law of abundance.

May you discover that to be truly selfish, you must be generous. In giving, may you fully experience what it means to receive.

## The Third Key Is To Dance

Our biggest problem with giving and receiving is that we try and track it. And when we do that, we lose the beat.

The best dancers are never singularly focused on the mechanics of their movements. They know how to let go, tune into the rhythm and synchronize with their partners.

It's like that with giving too. It's a futile exercise to track who is getting what. We just have to dance.

Take one of my friends for example, a very successful entrepreneur.

Along his journey, he realized that it's not just enough, as the cliché goes, to find your gifts. Gifts are actually meant to be \*given\*.

In his daily life, he started cultivating some beautiful practices of generosity. For instance, every time he walked into a fancy restaurant, he told the waiter to find a couple that is most madly in love. "Put their tab on my bill, and tell them a stranger paid for their meal, with the hope that they pay it forward somewhere somehow," he would say. Being a fan of Batman, he took his anonymity seriously: "If anyone finds out it was me, the deal is off."

Many restaurants, and waiters, knew him for this. And as a food connoisseur, some of his favorite places were also quite pricey -- upwards of a couple hundred bucks per person.

On one such day, he walks into a nice restaurant and does his usual drill. The person serving him obliges. However, this time, the waiter comes back with a counter request. "Sir, I know you like to be anonymous, but when I told that couple about the tab being covered, the woman just started sobbing. In fact, it's been ten minutes and she's still tearing up. I think it would make her feel better if you were to just introduce yourself, just this once."

Seeing this, he agrees to break his own cardinal rule and walks over to introduce himself. "Ma'am, I was only trying to make your day. If it has brought up something, I'm so sorry." The woman excitedly says, "Oh no, not at all. You've just made my year, maybe my life. My husband and I, well, we work at a small nonprofit with physically challenged kids, and we have been saving up all year to have this meal here. It is our one year marriage anniversary today." After a pause, she continues, "We always serve others in small ways, but to receive a kind act like this on our special day, well, it's just an overwhelming testimonial that what goes around comes around. It renews our faith in humanity. Thank you. Thank you \*SO\* much."

All of them were in tears. They kept in touch, he joined their board and they are friends to this day.

Now, in that scenario, who was the giver? Who was the receiver? And more importantly, does it even matter? Dancing, tells us to stop keeping track.

Sometimes you're giving and sometimes you're receiving, but it doesn't really matter because the real reward of that give and take doesn't lie in the value of

what's being exchanged. The real reward lies in what flows between us - our connection.

## Conclusion

So, my dear friends, there you have it. The bad news is that we're in the middle of a crisis of disconnection, and the good news is that each and every one of you has the capacity to repair the web -- to give, to receive and to dance.

Sometime last year, I spontaneously treated a homeless woman to something she really wanted -- ice-cream. We walked into a nearby 7-11, she got her ice-cream and I paid for it. Along the way, though, we had a great 3-minute chat about generosity and as we're leaving the store, she said something remarkable: "I'd like to buy you something. Can I buy you something?" She empties her pockets and holds up a nickel. The cashier looks on, as we all share a beautiful, awkward, empathy-filled moment of silence. Then, I heard my voice responding, "That's so kind of you. I would be delighted to receive your offering. What if we pay-it-forward by tipping this kind cashier who has just helped us?" Her face breaks into a huge smile. "Good idea," she says while dropping the nickel into the tip-jar.

No matter what you have, or don't have, we can all give. The good news is that generosity is not a luxury sport.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said it best, when he said, "Everyone can be great, because everyone can serve." He didn't say, "You have to be smart to serve." Or "You have to be famous to serve." Or "You have to be rich to serve." No, he said, "\*Everybody\* can be great, because \*everybody\* can serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don't need to know the second law of thermodynamics to serve. You only need a heart full of grace. A soul generated by love."

Harker Class of 2013, may you ALL find greatness in service to life. May you all give, receive -- and never, \*ever\* stop dancing.