

CONVOCATION SPEECH – MAXWELL SCHOOL – SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY – 13 MAY 2016

CATHERINE BERTINI

Dean Steinberg, Colleagues, Students, Families, Friends:

Thank you for the honor of speaking today.

Each of us, even those still seeking jobs, have the good fortune of choices in our careers.

Before I begin my formal remarks, I want to offer appreciation to our Dean, Jim Steinberg. He made a choice to leave a very senior role in government to spend five years of his valuable career here with us at the Maxwell School.

Now, as he moves on to a new chapter in his life, please join me in thanking him for all that he has given to us here at the Maxwell School and at Syracuse University.

RENEWING THE ATHENIAN CITY ON THE HILL

You came to Maxwell because you are committed to helping to lead our Athenian city on the hill, to make it “greater, better, and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us.” Yours is a far more complicated challenge than that of the generations between WWII and you. Our city needs much repair and attention, but its problems go beyond the traditional ones and they cannot be improved by using traditional solutions.

It is not that the infrastructure of our city is crumbling, although it is true that we face the challenge of many more people moving to our cities and being born into the world, especially in developing countries.

It is not that the economy is in recession, or that hunger is on the rise, or that fewer people are in school. In fact, many economic and social indicators are improving. Some of them, for instance, continuing the downward trend toward ending hunger, will happen on your watch and can be accomplished by employing traditional actions.

The challenges for which the shining city on the hill requires new answers, new solutions, new attitudes, are not about what we see in the buildings or in the infrastructure, but rather, what we hear from the people.

Millions of people, on the right and the left, in this country and in countries around the world – are alienated and showing their outrage with “the system.” Most of these are fed up. Many fear the future. Louder and louder, they are calling for change – in a Tunisian market,

in the squares of Cairo, the streets of London, factories in China, the political party primaries in the USA.

People are asking questions like:

When are the leaders going to listen to people like me and not just the rich and powerful?

Why am I the only one who seems to follow the rules, and yet other people get ahead?

Will politicians ever stop fighting with each other, and do something positive?

Why, after I lost my hard earned savings in the stock market in 2008, did no one go to jail?

What is wrong with a system where I have over \$100,000 in debt just because I went to college?

Are they now going to take away my health insurance to give it to someone else?

Why do drugs and medical care cost so much, anyway?

Why can't we stop the flow or manufacture of illegal drugs that is now impacting not just the poor and the rich, but the middle class as well?

Why does our so called "healthy" food cause so much obesity?

Why can't jobs be filled on merit, rather than on who you know?

Why is free trade a good thing when I lost my job because of it and no one cared to help me?

Who ARE those people coming from another land who are going to take our jobs?

Are there any institutions that we CAN trust? Not financial, not government, not health care, not even sports – not FIFA, not the NFL, not college basketball.

When are the 'powers that be' going to stop lying to us?

Is there NO end to government corruption?

People are fed up, shaken up, feel downtrodden and dissed. They are returning to the outrage expressed in the 1976 movie "Network". If you remember this line, recite with me –

"I am as mad as hell and I am not going to take this anymore!"

If many members of the general populace feel this way, imagine how terrorists and other nefarious groups that are determined to undermine society and order, can use some of these sentiments as calls to action.

THIS is the shining city on the hill that you are inheriting. And yes, YOU MUST make it better.

The worst actions you can take in your careers will involve accepting the status quo.

The worst words in your lexicon must be “We have always done it that way.”

The last thing you should do is to become part of an elite and out of touch “old boys or old girls” network.

Recall the George Bernard Shaw quote, paraphrased by US Senator Robert F Kennedy, “Some people see things as they are and say why? I dream things that never were and say, why not?”

I know it is possible to ask, “Why not?” I had the opportunity to do this while in the Bush 41 sub-cabinet at USDA when, over 25 years ago, at a time when almost no grocery stores accepted credit or debit cards, we asked, why don’t we change food stamp delivery to debit cards? We did. Health professionals said breastfeeding is important, so we asked: Why not have the government give additional food to poor breastfeeding mothers? We did. When many Americans seemed to have no clue about the balance of what was good to eat, we said: Let’s create a graphic that can show what people should consume for a healthy diet: the food guide pyramid was born.

And at the World Food Program, once we defined our mission as “Ending Hunger” we totally changed our focus from delivering TONS of food to feeding MILLIONS of people. Immediately, it became obvious that we must partner with cooks – women – and to put women in leadership roles around the world, if we were to end hunger, as they are the people in each household dedicated to the same. These reforms remain a model for efficiency and gender inclusion.

At the United Nations, when a female Dutch staff member, married to another woman from the Netherlands, could not get benefits for her wife, we broke through the barriers of senior officials who had blocked these benefits so that the Secretary General could decide affirmatively that the UN should provide benefits to all married couples; then we successfully defended the new benefits against delegates from conservative states who wanted to block them.

And even out of office, we dared say to an incoming US administration eight years ago, it is in America’s and the world’s interest to prioritize support for small holder farmers in the

developing world. The Obama administration called our report the blueprint for their successful initiatives in this field.

But even eight years ago was THEN. THIS is now. NOW is different.

Now more than ever, the world needs bold direction, out of the box strategists, creative communicators, and global thinkers. The world always must have public servants with compassion and understanding, but we also now must insure that public servants are without perceived conflicts of interest, without vested interests, and WITH a strong sense of inclusion for all.

Those servants, whether governments, researchers, NGOs, international organizations, or business, must understand what the people need and want.

New thinkers and actors include Maxwell alums like Amir Farnesh, MPA 2006 and MAIR 2007 who created IranPoll, a full service research company focusing exclusively on an emerging Iran;

Anne Wadsworth, who decided that she could change an entire community in Tanzania, through building a girls' school with local partners, even from Buffalo NY, after she was motivated by classes at Maxwell where she earned her EMPA in 2009.

Andrew Sweet, MAIR 2007, who, after writing for the Center for American Progress and being an assistant to the USAID administrator, moved to South Africa to play a leadership role in Power Africa – helping to extend electricity throughout the continent.

Ryan Beech, MAIR 2012, who is the person primarily responsible for implementing the ground breaking iris scanning system for distribution of benefits to Syrian refugees in Jordan.

And a graduate today, MAIR 2015 actually, Nicole Gerke, who decided she didn't have to wait for a job offer (though she would love to have one) to start her life's work, and who flew off to Greece to work with a Norwegian NGO help homeless migrants who are living at considerable risk.

These people are some who are changing the world – in new ways – employing new methods, renewed integrity, and a revitalized sense of energy.

And then there is you. Each of you have made a commitment to make the world a better place.

One by one, you can do that.

Now you must approach your career and each job you have within it in a very different manner than your parents have – than your professors have. If you are already mid-career, your future approach to public service must be considerably different that it was when your career began. But you also have new tools to use. The articulation of discontent must be matched by the articulation and implementation of effective actions. This is no longer the exclusive role of those who are elected to office, but to every person who in any way touches public policy, and to every person involved in insuring the success of any bureaucracy.

You must listen to what the people need and want and be able to respond quickly and effectively with thoughtful solutions. The plethora of social media as well as traditional media options offer thousands of opportunities for governments to communicate with its' populations, businesses with customers, health care providers with patients. Communication within an organization has always been crucial to success, but now you can communicate in almost intimate ways. The public can reach out and touch you, and you can reach them in unique, targeted communications never dreamed of a generation ago.

And you must do so. The future of our governments and perhaps our societies depends on your ability to communicate, your ability to create solutions, your commitment to act honorably, and ultimately, your ability to rebuild confidence in our institutions.... in our city – in our world.

You must not strive to keep the city the same; it is already different.

You must not be determined to simply steady peoples' concerns.

You must ready to lead – to carry your constituency – whatever it is – to heights we have not contemplated before – to open, responsive, transparent, inclusive, balanced and thoughtful governance where all people have access for what they need not just to survive, but to thrive.

We hope we have trained you well here at Maxwell.

But ultimately, the responsibility is yours.

You can be the difference between status quo and totally new solutions and horizons.

You can create new transparency in government.

You can build entire new communication systems.

You can steer the concern, the anger, and the disappointment of populations into constructive support for innovative programs.

In brief, you must not just change the world, you must SAVE the world.

We are counting on you to do so.