

Dr. Kurokawa speech for GRIPS Commencement

Sept. 17, 2013, Tokyo

President Shiraishi , member of the Board of Trustees, Honorable excellencies and distinguished guests, esteemed colleagues, friends, ladies and gentlemen and especially, the class of 2013, good afternoon.

It is my great honor and pleasure to speak to you today because I have been a GRIPS faculty for several years now. I care about this program. I'm proud of it. And I have great respect and affection for the students I have come to know over the years.

I am also glad to have this opportunity because I happen to have some insights I would very much like to share with those of you who will soon return to your home countries.

When you signed up for this program, I expect you had a pretty clear idea what you would get from it in terms of the curriculum and the diploma. You could anticipate how this experience would help you along your career path. And I hope we lived up to your expectations.

But what I want to discuss is something you may have gained from this experience that you never expected or even imagined before coming here.

It's an evolution of perspective and consciousness that comes from stepping outside the circle of your family and friends, away from your culture and country and beyond the conventional wisdom that has surrounded you since your infancy.

For me, this was an experience that profoundly changed my life.

In 1969, my future was assured as a medical doctor and a graduate of the University of Tokyo, I could look forward to life-long security as a member of this nation's elite.

At age 32, all I had to do was ride patiently up the faculty escalator.

Then, I accepted an offer to go to Philadelphia for two years as a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Pennsylvania Medical School. As expected, my research skills and knowledge advanced rapidly. But what I didn't expect was how my worldview began to evolve.

My mentor, chair of the department of biochemistry, encouraged me to be independent, to voice my own opinions in discussions and to be skeptical about what he told us. In effect, he treated me as an equal – which was deeply shocking for me.

After 30 years in Japan, of being told what to think for the first time in my life I had to think for myself. And where that led me shocked my family, my friends and my colleagues.

I decided to drop out of the Japanese system to stay in America and start over from zero, re-qualifying as a physician in US. Everyone thought I was crazy - and they were probably right.

But over the course of 10 years I worked my way up through the U.S. system and eventually landed a wonderful position at UCLA medical school as professor of medicine.

I still had friends and family ties in Japan, but having burned my bridges to Japan so dramatically I never imagined I could come back here.

Then in 1983 after 14 years in America, out of the blue, a thing has happened

My former mentor from Tokyo University came to see me – and by then he was head of the medical department. He urged me to come back to Japan, telling me, ‘University of Tokyo needs someone like you.’

No one else on the faculty would have made such an offer, but my mentor told me, ‘I really need you. You can come back and try it for a couple of years and see if you like it.’ How could I have turned him down?

What I brought back with me was a very different mindset, a different perspective and a habit of speaking my mind – that was, shall we say not universally appreciated by my colleagues.

But I’m humbled and grateful that over the past 30 years, I’ve been given opportunities to promote change, first in medical education as professor, chair and dean; and later in science policy.

I was elected to President of the Science Council of Japan; then served as Special Advisor to the Prime Minister Abe in his first Cabinet, then to Prime Minister Fukuda.

More recently, The National Diet of Japan appointed me to head the independent Commission to Investigate Fukushima Nuclear Accident. This was the first such Commission in the history of the Constitutional Democratic Japan.

Many of you may have been here at the time of that huge earthquake in the afternoon of March 11, 2011, the earthquake strongly felt here at GRIPS and many could not go home that Friday.

Our Fukushima Commission Report has been highly valued in the wide world authorities, but somehow less in Japan. The Report was valued for its facts-based description of what we found, openness, transparency and clarity.

But enough about me.

The point I want to make is that you are now in the same spot I found myself in 1971 when I finished my postdoctoral fellowship in Philadelphia.

Maybe I should not project my own experience onto yours but after a year or more outside of your own society it is likely that;

First, you have never been more independent in your thinking than you are right now.

Second, you have never been less influenced by the conventional wisdom of your own society – the ingrained opinions, the prejudices and the collective myopia that, in one way or another, every country suffers from.

Third, you are as free as you’ll ever be from what we call ‘Groupthink.’

Japan happens to excel at Groupthink.

But, again, every society has it to some extent. The narratives differ from country to country but the impulse is the same the world over.

And, again, while no one is ever totally free of groupthink, today you are probably as far from your own society's strain of it as you will ever be.

So the question I invite you to consider is what are you going to do with this independent consciousness when you go home?

Are you just going to let it be dissolved by the conventional wisdom? Or will you let it guide you down a different path?

By a tradition, what I'm supposed to do up here is to inspire you with sage advice, perhaps urge you to be a 'team player.'

But what I want to do instead is to incite you to Dissent.

I will not tell you to drop out of the system as I did. But neither am I going to counsel you to fit in, to tow the line, to keep your head down and your mouth shut.

You know that old Japanese cliché, 'the nail that sticks up must be hammered down?'

Well, my hope is that GRIPS graduates the world over will stick out like stainless steel nails: that you will be in every respect outstanding

And to that end, sage or not, I have some advice for you.

Wherever your path may lead... let your steps be guided by three fundamental principles:

- Reason
- Compassion
- Courage.

When I commend you to REASON, I mean the capacity each of us has to think independently, applying logic, common sense and intellectual rigor in everything we do.

Because REASON is our only defense against the most dangerous force on this planet.

That force is human stupidity, the deadliest of all pathogens. And the only one we can never hope to eradicate because it can generate spontaneously anywhere at any time.

In fact, thanks to the 'viral' capacity of the internet stupidity can now replicate itself faster than any biological pathogen. And when stupidity infects a population prone to groupthink, the consequences can be catastrophic.

I mentioned earlier that I headed the independent inquiry into the Fukushima Nuclear Accident.

Ours was not the only inquiry, but it was the only one that was truly independent. And I'm confident that our methodology was the most rigorous; informed by the experience of panels that investigated prior major disasters, like Three Mile Island nuclear accident in US in 1979.

One key lesson learned in investigations like this is that the focus must be on finding out what happened – not on assigning blame. Because when it's about blame everyone runs and hides so you end up learning nothing.

But what the media want is a culprit. They want TV footage of 'the accused' being led into a police station in handcuffs.

Sure, if our goal had been to deliver a scapegoat, we could have framed someone. If we have done that, however, it would have been no more than a Kabuki performance.

The awful truth that came to me was that no one and everyone was to blame.

That is because nuclear power had the 'mandate of heaven' – as a national priority adopted in the wake of the economic growth and oil shocks.

In our society, you do not dare to be a nail sticking up in the path of something that powerful.

Why would you? -- When everyone around you repeats the mantra: 'Nuclear power is inherently safe.' 'We don't need to do evacuation drills because nuclear power is inherently safe, and such drills would only alarm the population.'

It was specifically not in our mandate to determine whether or not nuclear power is safe. But I can tell you that nuclear power can only be safe if the people in charge of it are continually obsessed with eliminating any possible risk factor.

And at every level that was not the mindset we found at and around Fukushima Nuclear Disaster.

It was a disaster that triggered by a 'natural disaster' but, the underlying cause was a man-made, due to willful and concerted human stupidity – Groupthink.

I came under a lot of criticism right after release of our Report, for blaming many 'elites' of responsible positions of the government and corporate who led to the Regulatory Capture, and for blaming Japan's culture of "Groupism" for the disaster. But I and my team believed in the principle of *The Truth Be Told*.

Groupthink is not something uniquely Japanese – it exists everywhere. But we are more prone to it than most – in fact we are proud of it.

We have long taken pride in our knack for focusing all minds on the task at hand — '100 million hearts beating as one' - that was how wartime propaganda and that's what produced our postwar economic miracle.

But when 100 million hearts focus on the wrong target we lack the alarm systems, the corrective mechanisms needed to redirect our course.

What are those mechanisms?

They are the muscles of a vibrant civil society: diligent regulators; honest bureaucrats serving for the people of Japan; activist prosecutors, alert legislators, courageous whistle-blowers, relentless journalists, independent academics, thriving NGOs and, above all, ordinary people who vote.

So if the cause of the disaster was willful stupidity, the corrective measure needed to prevent future disasters is a stronger civil society.

Why am I telling you all this?

I know most of you are headed for careers in government, in bureaucracies of the government where Groupthink is almost a religion.

That is why above all, I urge you to keep your independent perspective to rigorously apply logic in everything you do and accept nothing as fact without due consideration. Let REASON be your guide.

One of the best things about a career in medicine is that it challenges both your intellect and your humanity.

No matter how brilliant a diagnostician you may be without COMPASSION you are clinically useless. If you work with patients you have a huge responsibility to help people and their families as they face the toughest moments of their lives.

In medical education, compassion is the one thing you cannot teach because it has to come from inside. The only thing you can do is to create an environment that encourages and rewards compassionate behavior.

The point is that you would do well to bring more compassion to public service compassion for the people you are meant to serve.

Promote and reward compassion among the people you lead – and practice it yourself.

That starts with small acts: please never, ever look down your nose... at even the most humble beggar in your country.

REASON, COMPASSION and – at the end of the day – COURAGE.

As Bismarck famously said, “Politics is the art of the possible.”

By that I believe he meant it’s all about compromise which is the mechanism at the heart of every large organization – government or business.

So you cannot defend every principle to the death.

But there may come a moment in your career when you see something so unjust, so foolish, so corrupt, so obviously dangerous.

That you know by cold reason and a compassionate heart it cannot be allowed to pass.

For example, you see that it is clearly dangerous to put back-up generators in the basement of a nuclear power plant that is at risk of being flooded in a tsunami.

To blow the whistle you may have to risk your entire career and your ability to pay for your kids' college education. If you find yourself in such a predicament I hope you'll find the courage to do the right thing.

So again, wherever your path leads, let your steps be guided by REASON, COMPASSION, and COURAGE.

Finally, I very much hope this program – and living in Japan – has been a valuable and enjoyable experience for you. But I'm going to admit something to you. No matter how much value you have gained from being here, Japan has gained more by having you live among us.

Not only have we learned much from knowing you – and by 'we' I don't just mean people here at GRIPS, I mean your next-door neighbors and everyone you've met. Not only have we learned from you Japan will benefit when you tell people at home who we really are.

Because although everyone in the world knows *things* 'Made in Japan' very few people know who we are on a human level.

For better or worse, thanks to Hollywood, everyone in the world knows the full range of American personality types. A Malaysian can tell a Kenyan, 'the one guy was like Harrison Ford and the lady was like Angelina Jolly' and they will understand right away.

But few people overseas know who Japanese are in the same way. I hope you will leave with nice things to say about us but say what you like about Japan. The point is that your view will be rooted in real experience and familiarity which is better than a lot of the strange ideas people may have about this country. We gain by that.

What I really hope though is that when you go, you are not gone forever. I hope you will come back to Japan many times and that your friendships here will be life-long.

Thank you and congratulations to you all.