



Commencement Address at the College Of Engineering

University Of Michigan, USA

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By Albina du Boisrouvray, Founder and President

Dean Knoll, Distinguished faculty and guests. Parents and friends. And, most of all, young men and women we honor today: the University of Michigan College of Engineering Graduating Class of 1995. And one whom I personally know, Lester Su, our first François-Xavier Bagnoud aerospace fellow graduate.

Thank you for inviting me today. I feel extremely honored and touched by this invitation, but also very surprised because my work is not scientific but deals with humanitarian issues, health and children's rights. And as a person I am mechanically and technologically hopeless. I have never operated a computer, and never learned how to deal with the most elemental mechanical things like automobile breakdowns.

But as it happens, I am the daughter of a mining engineer and the mother of an aerospace engineer, and so I am here because of both my deep commitment and connection to the College of Engineering through your colleague, my son, François-Xavier. And also because his premature and brutal death shaped a challenge I couldn't escape, either to die myself or start a survival journey that has taken me over nine years in order to reach life and joy, once again.

François-Xavier loved this place. He accomplished a great deal in his short life, but I can honestly say that no accomplishment gave him more pride than studying at this great engineering school, and taking his place on your roll of honored graduates. It was here that he planned a life's work that would bind the tangible benefits of engineering to larger objectives in the wider world around us.

It brings me joy to talk to you on this important day of your lives. And I come to share some personal thoughts and painfully learned lessons in which I found the keys to exit the doors of despair and to open those of hope, love and life.

On the first of January 1986, I was a successful film producer with a wonderful family, enjoying good health, living an interesting and exciting life, and above all, I was mother of the most wonderful, beautiful, loving boy which one could ever dream of. Like everybody, I had professional worries and had endured a fair number of personal tragedies, but because of the invaluable gift of François-Xavier, I was the happiest woman in the world. Fourteen days later, François crashed with his helicopter in the night of the African desert, and my happiness, my life, my world were shattered. I didn't care any more about anything or anybody including myself. I hoped I would go to sleep and never wake up to reality. But life doesn't disappear by itself when you want it to, and I plodded through the days and weeks and months as did his father, his step father, his aunt and his closest friends.

People I had never met in the Valais, Switzerland, came to talk about François, telling me how he had impacted on their lives either by rescuing them or by his caring concern and warm loving friendship. François' passion was flying, but it was also his connection to others, his little network woven by a sense of brotherhood, his generosity which was revealed by his glowing happy smile. Clinging to his memory and all that he was about, I found the path back into my own deep self.

From always being a political activist on the side of oppressed minorities, I had become close to Doctors Without Borders and Doctors of the World, groups that go mostly into war situations to help the wounded. So in 1987, I went with Doctors of the World to Beirut, still at war and a shattered world. I met with refugees in the East and West to bring them medicine and food. I met with families who had lost not only one child, but two or three and other members of their families. I reflected on how privileged I had been, and still was, and that individual tragedy has to become a source of love and solidarity. Therefore, there were duties for me in the world to be carried out. And life had to go on.

We started the François-Xavier Bagnoud Association and Foundation to reflect the three main interests of François-Xavier: community life in his home state, the Valais; growth in the usefulness of engineering knowledge at his alma mater; and a commitment to the rescue of children, the affirmation of their rights and health everywhere; especially, as they have no political voice of their own and need others to speak up for them.

Had he lived, François-Xavier would have helped with the funding for construction of a new building because a modern plant has always been essential to engineering research, and he wanted Michigan to continue to attract ambitious, bright students. He was privileged to receive such a fine education here and we wanted others to enjoy the same opportunity. We created the Aerospace Prize in his name to encourage aerospace research to benefit people.

Today, as you cross the threshold of your future, I deeply hope that you will never have to steer through those waters of despair that I and the family did, but I hope that the experience I drew from it and the solid lessons of life that it taught me can be of use to you one day in your lives.

You will have crises; they are a part of life; and they are challenges to go beyond. They are the crossing pathways where you have to make choices. And so what I tell you today is that whatever happens including the worst, stay in there; cling on; don't ever give up. If you cannot yourself feel happiness, use your time, resources and talents to make others feel better or happier. Give their life a better quality and you will then reap the rewards of solidarity and fraternity. Alleviate the sufferings of others and you will alleviate your own. One day a child will smile as a result of something you did for him or her; or tears of joy will come into a grown ups' eyes and then suddenly, their happiness and well being will ripple back and you will feel it, not for you, but for them. And the capacity to feel will be back. You yourself will start feeling once again. You will have started to turn the key that opens the door of life and you will close the one on death and despair. If you have love inside you, which for some reason you cannot give to another, give it at large and you will feel it coming back. Healing can be found in our relationships to one another and in a shared commitment to a purpose. Because at the end of your journeys, long or short, that is what really matters, a small or big or several differences in other people's destinies so that our time and presence on this planet is not useless and without consequences, distributing love at large and generating a little more happiness. In "Schindler's List," there is quoted at the end a beautiful lesson from the Talmud: "He who saves a single life, it is as if he saved the entire world.

I tell you this today: be the guardians of a flame; that is your capacity to love; keep that love alive. Challenges of all sorts will be part and parcel of the unmapped journey, but use them to fuel the flame higher.

What characterizes you today, women and men of the Class of 95, is that you are young and you have chosen to be an engineer which in the dictionary is defined as "one who conducts an enterprise with skillful or artful contrivance." In 1995, however, you will conduct your enterprise not in a global village, but in a global jungle.

Ethnic slaughters, science fiction horrors becoming true life in the Tokyo subway gas tragedy or the Oklahoma City terrorist bombing. An AIDS pandemic that continues unabated. We live in a world of abominable levels of poverty – 1 billion people, that is one person out of five on the planet lives in miserable conditions. 1 out of every 114 people in the world has been uprooted by war and famine. 400 million children are enslaved in forced labor. 2 million children have died in war in the last 10 years. 12 million children are homeless at this very moment. Jobs are disappearing in a tidal wave of global economic and technological change.

Last month in Copenhagen, all the nations of the world met for a summit on social development to address the root causes of poverty. Their conclusions pointed to the fact that society was unraveling.

Then there are environmental issues. Some say we are alarmists. Others see however, the unraveling of the ecological chain of life already underway. We need good scientists/engineers like you to tell us where we are and where we should go. A World Bank report gives a flood warning for the year 2050 to 48 Chinese cities, with a population of 76 million people. Today, we are just 55 years away from that date. Chief Seattle's words are to be remembered: "Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

Just as in the personal human level we are all interconnected, so in a cosmic level, everything is interrelated. We are in a holistic ecological Internet, not knowing precisely how it works, but knowing we are on it. We have to be concerned about interactions at all levels. As engineers, for example, your task is to help plan a new economy that is decarbonized and demethonized. Your task is to develop and preserve precious resources water, air, energy. These and other issues are wonderful challenges ahead of you. Personal crises are challenges for us; world crises are challenges for our species. Protect life and protect love.

My generation believed that politics, ideologies and philosophy would change the course of history. The fact is that technology changed the course of history much quicker than we thought and in more radical ways. So go out and research, discover, invent, accomplish. Even small inventions can have a great impact, by a ripple effect. That is what on a humanitarian level, the François-Xavier Bagnoud Association does with simple, human creativity in Burma, Uganda, New Jersey, Boston, to name a few places. For example, in Rwanda, the site of so much hatred and slaughter, we are building 500 houses for orphans and their foster or extended families in order to heal the social fabric with what little life and hope is left; so that this elemental process of reconciliation and micro-reconstruction will extend beyond what we do and will get every child of the hundreds of thousands of refugees settled back into a family with love and earth roots.

It is up to your generation to harness technology to put it at the service of the great humanistic principles which we fought for in the 1960s and 1970s. Over the past two or three hundred years, your profession has brought enormous benefits to humanity -- and enormous threats to our survival.

It is sad but realistic to say that the twin imperatives behind most advances in engineering have been (1) national defense, and (2) industrialists' desire to become rich. In those days, the engineers themselves were at some distance from how their work was used by others -- for good or ill. The use of force is sometimes justified. And profitable trade is a good thing in itself. But there is a larger world around us than the world of war, and the world of commerce. Engineers today have a vital role to play in helping that larger world work better for more of the five-and-a-half billion of us who live in it. The Watsons of IBM; Hewlett Packard; Wang and Gates; and young men and women like you want a greater say in how the fruits of your technology are used. It is essential that all of you who graduate today accept that wider view of your obligations.

Gramsci, an Italian communist of the 1920s, and F. Scott Fitzgerald, an American writer of the swinging 20s, strangely said the same thing from two totally different perspectives. Throughout Gramsci's work there is the recurrent theme about the pessimism of intelligence and the optimism of will power. And Fitzgerald wrote in "The Crackup": "One should, for example, be able to see that things are hopeless, and yet be determined to make them otherwise." And I stress if you have a strong determination, you will make them otherwise.

So if you can in your personal life and/or by your engineering inventions make a difference in just one person's life, then it is worthwhile. Remember also that today technology keeps us wired everywhere and all the time in such a way that we are never out of touch, except very often with ourselves. And we must not let that happen. So not only must we cling onto our true selves, and go beyond our limits, but also love and dream to enable the human story to keep unfolding.

As engineers and new "tele-commuters" form global networks not only with economists and environmental groups but with human rights and health groups.

So to all of you, young talented women and men, engineers of the 21st century, beautiful flock of young birds about to fly into your destinies, thank you for allowing me to share with you a few life-spun beliefs and personal thoughts. And before we part, I would like to ask one thing of you, Lester, and of each and every one of you out there. Throughout your many flights, remember the story of a little boy called Iqbal Masih. Iqbal was a little Pakistani boy, 12-years old, who worked under abysmal conditions as a carpet weaver, shackled to a carpet loom. He was sold by his parents at the age of four. He spoke up, crusaded and highlighted the horrors of child labor in Pakistan. He won a \$15,000 reward. With that money he planned to go to school and become a lawyer. But because of who he was, ten days ago he was shot and killed by the carpet mafia.

In the Francois-Xavier Bagnoud Association, we have started a Children's Rights campaign to eradicate forced child labor. It will now be done in the memory of Iqbal Masih whose short life and courage have been so inspirational. If every one of the hundreds of millions of adults in the developed world, each spoke up to rescue and rehabilitate one child each out of the 400 hundred million in forced labor, the world economy would have to find a new way to function, and protect, educate and care for young children. If you remember Iqbal, maybe you will be among those adults.

So now, I join your parents and teachers in congratulating you on this special day, and shower you with all my best wishes, and I want to say to each and everyone of you personally as I am saying to Lester Su, go out into the world hands on; with your specific tools and knowledge that are so greatly needed today. Being old enough to be your mother, I will think of you along your roads with maternal tender loving care. Keep me posted. Reach beyond yourselves; have a fulfilling life for yourselves and for others.

Thank you so much for having me, and God bless you all.