

## Beyond “blah, blah, blah”: Action to make development sustainable

President Woodruff, Provost Jeitschko, Executive Vice President Beauchamp, Trustees Bryum and Tebay, graduates and families, Spartans all...

My profound thanks for this honor. Given the focus of my own work, I am particularly grateful to be receiving it from MSU, widely recognized as a world leader in linking knowledge with action for sustainable development.

My route to this stage in your Breslin Center began with my own first job after graduation: running the US government’s first official study on what we now know as our climate crisis. That study, published by the US Department of Energy in 1982, helped to launch 40 years of what your generation’s Greta Thunberg described in her recent speech to the United Nations as.....

Blah, blah, blah, blah....

Blah, blah. Ouch.

But tragically, she’s right. For while I and my colleagues continued to do more studies, write more reports, give more speeches and otherwise blah-blah on and on, our actions were mostly confined to joining with the rest of humanity to...

- Double our emissions of the greenhouse gases that are now cooking the planet;
- Permeate the world ... and your bloodstreams ... with lead, mercury, and plastic toxins;
- Exterminate hundreds of the other species with which we once shared the earth;
- Unleash the cascade of epidemics now plaguing our world....
- ... and so on and on.

Our devastation of nature has, to be sure, come with some immediate benefits for people. Most of you graduating today -- together with most of the other 5+ billion people born since I started my career of blah-blah-blahing about climate change -- are now living lives that are healthier, wealthier, better educated, and more democratically governed than the lives of most people who came before you. But those gains are accruing ever more inequitably. And the destructive pathways of consumption and production that have gotten us into our present mess cannot be sustained.

How to make the human use of planet earth more *just* and *sustainable* is, I believe, the ultimate challenge facing your generation. You didn't ask for it. But my generation has dumped it in your laps. Not because we didn't see it coming.... but because we failed to turn our endless talk into meaningful action.

But if our talk has not been enough, it *has* still been something. While you were growing up, our incessant blah-blahing *did* clarify the causes and consequences of the sustainability problem. And *did* elevate that problem to the core of the global agenda, culminating with the UN General Assembly's unanimous adoption of a single set of Sustainable Development Goals in 2015. Though complex in detail, the central commitment of these shared goals is:

- First, to enhance people's well-being in the here and now, with special attention to those least well off;
- Second, to do so equitably -- without undermining the ability of future generations (your generations!) to pursue their own well-being; and
- Finally, to do so in ways that conserve the earth's life support systems.

More blah-blah, to be sure. But these shared goals are now serving people, firms and nations around the world as a lodestar toward which they can pull together in their common journey toward sustainability. The problem is that the sheer scope and ambition of these sustainable development goals can easily lead to paralysis. For our predicament today is *so* objectively desperate that no sane individual can realistically expect to "achieve" the goals of sustainable development, or "solve" the climate crisis, or "banish" global injustice.

What is to be done? For *changing* the world -- rather than merely talking it to death -- I've come to believe in the wisdom of an old phrase I first encountered as a graduate student reading Rene Dubos: "think globally, act locally." And in a newer phase, popularized in a recent book by Michelle Obama: "the power of small." Both of these inspiring activists point to the importance of simultaneously *broadening* our understanding of the complex system we want to change, and *narrowing* our action agenda to manageable -- even seemingly insignificant -- tasks that reaffirm our own agency, help us learn how to get stuff done, and earn for us the right to hope.

Once you start looking, you can see everywhere the inspiring power of their vision. Consider just a few examples from the work of informed activists who it's been my good fortune to know. First....

- [Making climate legislation work](#): The massive IRA Climate Bill signed by Pres. Biden in August is one of the most potentially transformative but frighteningly complex pieces of

legislation I have ever seen. Congressional leaders credit many outsiders with helping to get the job done. But they single out Leah Stokes, who drew on her recent training in politics and public policy, together with her own awesome determination, to forge key micro-coalitions of potential opponents and get them to hammer out some of the countless devilish, boring details that had to be just “so” before the bill could become a law. Another example...

- [Designing immunity for all](#): Conventional vaccines have an accessibility bias: places tend to lose out that lack cold chains to keep drugs stable, or skilled people to administer them. Livio Valenti felt we had to do better. For *his* “small step” he returned to curious stories he had heard regarding the peculiar medical properties of... silk. Pursuing that thread, he eventually co-founded Vaxess -- a firm that has now built from novel silk-based technologies a family of shelf-stable vaccines and therapeutics that patients can administer themselves. Investors have invested; phase-1 trials are nearing completion. Wow. For my a third example I turn to...
- [Telling Africa’s food story](#): East Lansing has more than 40 restaurants featuring Asian food, more than 30 focused on Latin American food ... and just 1 serving African food. Similar biases exist everywhere in the world, including in Africa itself -- which despite having some of the most diverse and healthy crops in the world often ends up as an importer of high-cost, low-nutrition food. To Ndidi Nwuneli, a Nigerian entrepreneur, this seemed nuts. She, too, started small and local, crafting stories to reshape peoples’ mindsets about her homeland’s crops and cooking. The enthusiastic responses to these stories led her to found “Changing Narratives Africa,” an organization that showcases, promotes and refines the whole continent’s food contributions to an ever-more-receptive world. Next, take one of your home-grown examples....
- [Saving an endangered species](#): MSU’s own Distinguished Professor Jack Liu continues to be my model of an engaged scholar, not only making profound contributions to the theory of coupled human-natural systems, but also remorselessly connecting that broad theory with local practice. He began this connecting with small actions in China’s Wolong Reserve. These have since rippled out to play a significant role in saving China’s giant panda from extinction and indeed in revolutionizing many of the country’s broader conservation practices.

I could easily extend this list of inspiring examples about how individuals' whole-systems understanding, coupled with their "small and local" actions, have helped promote transitions toward sustainability. But I'm much more interested in your extensions rather than mine. To seed what I hope will become a continuing dialog, please join me in telling a story about you. The setting is...

- [DearTomorrow](#): Jill Kubit and Trisha Schrum were worried about the tenuous connection between present and future generations in efforts to grapple with climate change. Drawing on Trisha's training in behavioral science, they conceived of a brilliant project in which they asked a few volunteers to write an "action" letter to their own future – their future children, future family, or future selves. In particular, writers were asked to include in their letter a promise to their future to take one specific small action now, with the goal of helping to ensure a safe and secure future for their loved ones. The letters -- some signed, some anonymous, some humble, some angry -- are posted on the DearTomorrow public website for any and all to contemplate and learn from. What started as a few simple letters from Jill, Trish, and small number their friends is now going viral. So here's your opportunity to commit to one "small and local" but meaningful action you could take on the great challenge of our age. Write it up in your own letter to your own future. Share it on [DearTomorrow.org](#).

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In closing, let me emphasize my conviction that in these perilous times, there are indeed responsibilities that come with the privilege of the elite education you are celebrating today. But these are not impossible responsibilities for saving the world. Just for committing to link your knowledge with your actions in ways that might make that world just a little bit better. Fulfilling even those "small and local" responsibilities can still be a daunting task. In my own continuing struggles with it I've been blessed by challenging times, good luck, generous colleagues.... and by an inspiring role model for walking-the-talk on sustainability in Anni Clark -- the remarkable woman whose husband I am so grateful to be. I can only wish, for all of you, comparably good fortune and good company in what I hope will be your own active pursuit of sustainability.

Thank you all, for all you have done, and will be doing.

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