

Barry Salzberg  
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## Signals from the Future

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Greetings! Greetings, everybody. What a day, huh?

To the McDonough Class of 2012: Congratulations. And to the spouses and parents and supporters who stuck it out with you—it paid off, didn't it?

And thank you, Dean Thomas—if only my mother were here, to hear your eloquent introduction. In my mind's eye, I can see my mother. Holding a program against the glare and nudging my big sister, "Barry? Who on earth are they talking about? My Barry?"

But I tell you, to be robed and declared a *doctor*. Me, the second person in our family ever to go to college after my big sister—well, Dean Thomas, faculty, and students, I cannot tell you what an honor this is<sup>1</sup>. Especially coming from a business school of such global eminence. Believe me, this is an *incredible* honor for which I will always be proud,

and *forever* grateful. Thank you. Thank you so very much. Each and every one of you.

Well, then. One thing my mother particularly disliked was long speeches. So I will keep my remarks brief.

Specifically, I would like to talk about the future. Your future. About the signals—the generational cues, you might say—that the future is now transmitting, as if from some distant planet. Using *you*, the new generation, as its messengers. Think about that: The class of 2012—emissaries of the future. Only, without Keanu Reeves and slow-motion acrobatics in *The Matrix*. True, I cannot foresee the future—even wearing this magical robe. But, as I travel around the world and see the range of talent, the ambition, the sophistication—well, I think I can predict what the future will be *about*. The stakes. The key challenges.

—The future will be *global*. Fully a third of you come from outside the U.S. You brought your global perspective to campus and to class, and my guess is that it rubbed off on everyone else.

—The future will be *diverse*, and your class shares and celebrates diversity. *Global* diversity.

— And finally, in a world that now routinely expects to be amazed, the future will be *competitive*. Intensely competitive. Meaning the need to continually upgrade your skills and leadership abilities. Just as you've been doing here at McDonough.

So, as I look out at you, I can say the future *has* arrived—and I'm proud to be standing here looking right at it.

As you well know, you're rejoining the workforce at a time when the global economy is undergoing a massive shift—what's often talked about as "the Rise of the Rest." We're seeing emerging economies rapidly challenge the dominance of the West, just as breath-taking new technologies—cloud, mobile, social media, analytics, and more—are redefining how we do business.

And I detect another shift: We may have become the first era to actually *welcome* the future.

It wasn't always this way. In earlier, slower times, most people actively *resisted* the future. When the railroads appeared in the 1830s, some doctors strongly objected. They said the human brain could not withstand speeds of 28 and even 30 miles per hour. Impossible!

Then there was the automobile. Another terrible idea, said its detractors. Noisy contraptions, they would scare the horses.

So history tells us that the present often resists the future. *Or did*.

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<sup>1</sup> Barry Salzberg was recognized by Georgetown University with an Honorary Doctorate for his strong advocacy for giving back to the community, for his champion of humanitarian causes, and for his work and commitment to empowering young adults to become catalysts for change in communities around the world.

For in fact, the process seems to have reversed itself, from *resistance* to flat out *insistence* on change. Today, we live in a culture *fascinated* with change. Businesses know they *have* to keep changing—searching for those disruptive innovations that will ensure their future. That’s why we’re welcoming social media, mobile apps—anything that keeps us connected, collaborating, inventing. That’s our future—your future.

In other words, disruptive change may be forcing the world to adapt—in *advance*—to a new reality. A reality you understand better than anyone.

To put it another way, *I* know that *you* already know about all this—about the future and what it’s telling us. I say this because I, too, have been listening to the future, by talking to young professionals like you. And my organization has been researching your attitudes, skills, and preferences—who you are and what matters to you most.

So I know you’re ready for the future. And not just because you now have that shiny new Georgetown degree. All your life, you’ve been preparing for this moment. Unconsciously preparing for it.

Take the video games of your childhood (or possibly even your present!). Truly a signal from the future, if ever there was one. Research shows that surgeons who played video games as kids make fewer mistakes in the operating room. And have sharper fine motor skills—critical in the age of micro-surgery. All thanks to Pac Man and Super Mario Brothers. You see that parents: *You* thought your kids would turn into aimless misfits—but, in those lost hours they were secretly studying to be brain surgeons. Rocket scientists. Super-hero MBAs!

So, in studying your generation, we find you share three compelling characteristics. All adapted to this time:

1. *First, you’re already borderless in your thinking, and you expect that same sense of limitless possibility in the workplace.* And that’s exactly what business needs to supply—that sense of pure global possibility.
2. *Second, you are hungry for a sense of purpose and meaning*—to be part of a business that truly makes a difference. In the era of the Occupy Movement, when some folks openly question the social value of business, you can help restore belief and trust in business—through your own actions. Upholding standards. And standing for what is right. This is critically important when trust in business and business leaders is still way too low. Because business, I believe, plays a crucial role in building a better society. And, a brighter, more secure future. In which you will be the leaders. So speak up for it.
3. *Third, you want to learn from other leaders in a candid two-way dialogue.* You want more than case studies. You want to develop your skills based on real-world situations. You want leaders who are in the game and can show you how they play.

With that as context, allow me—if I may—to present you with three imperatives:

*Imperative 1: Cultivate that borderless mindset.* Only you can lead the charge to the more global world of tomorrow. Keep your global goggles on. Keep hold of that idea of yourself as a Citizen of the World. Embody global thinking and behavior. And expect it in others. This will be critical in the next great phase of globalization.

*Imperative 2: Help restore trust in business.* Yes, due to the actions of a minority, business did hit an iceberg a few years ago. But you can make a real difference by raising the ethical standard for business. And by the way, don’t apologize for your profession, whatever it may be. Tell people about the positive social benefits that business delivers. That we’re part of the solution, not the root of all problems.

*Imperative 3: Embrace leadership as a never-ending generational exchange.* Leadership is a relationship founded on a dialogue. Learn leadership from those ahead of you. And pass it on to those behind you. It’s as simple as that.

You know, when I joined the work world 34 years ago, generally speaking, new hires had two duties: To keep quiet and do what we were told...and to keep that thumb glued to the button on the photocopier. *Glued.*

But my, how things have changed. I know this because my organization hires a lot of top young talent— approximately 50,000 people worldwide this year alone. And when new MBAs like you from McDonough come knocking, phew, the *expectations!*

Why, just the other day one of our Human Resources people told me about an interview he’d had with one of your class. Now I don’t want to embarrass you, whoever you are. But we’re talking about a *superb* talent—4.0 grade point average...cutting edge research...two board memberships. And, speaks five languages. Including Chinese.

“Oh, and by the way,” said our interviewer finally, “What kind of salary are you looking for?”

Well, the McDonough candidate never even blinked. “Oh, in the neighborhood of \$350,000 annually—depending on the benefits, of course.”

Well, at this our interviewer perked up. “So what would you say to *five weeks’* vacation, *fourteen* paid holidays...*full* medical and dental...company matching retirement to 50 percent of your salary? *Plus*, a new company leased car every two years—say, a BMW?”

“Wow!” said the candidate. “Are you kidding?”

And the interviewer replied, “Well, yeah, but you started it.”

Look, I don’t claim the world of today is some kind of nirvana—hardly. But I’m pleased to say your generation joins a more transparent, conscious, and equitable world: global and ecological, virtual and peer-to-peer. And, I believe more generous. More *giving*—perhaps the most important quality there is in the business world.

Over the past few years, it has been my great privilege to get to know an extraordinary leader by the name of Shelly Lazarus. She’s Chairman of the advertising agency, Ogilvy & Mather.

You don’t need me to tell you that advertising is hyper-competitive. So it might seem surprising that Shelly says: “The greatest leaders are inherently generous.” By that, she means such leaders invite people into the decision-making process—share the problems, the challenges, the burdens. And then, when together you’ve found the solutions, they share the glory—because they’re generous.

So as you walk out of here today, into your future, *remember*. Remember the many people who held that door wide open for you. And never, *ever* forget to hold the door open for the generations coming after you. Generations—like yours—who bring fresh eyes. And new ears. Really, a whole new headset for those deep-space signals emanating from the world of tomorrow.

Thanks for listening—and good luck.

**To view the speech, [click here](#).**