

**Speech by Sam Pickens
at the Aga Khan Academy Hyderabad Graduation ceremony
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Director of Academies, Salim Bhatia
Head of Academy, Dr Geoffrey Fisher
Distinguished guests
Good evening parents and Class of 2019



I am neither a celebrity nor a VIP, so I would like to start by listing my qualifications to give this talk. I grew up in south India when Indira Gandhi, Rahul's grandmother, was in power. MGR, whose action films I loved as a boy, was Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu. I studied the miridungam.

I went to a residential school in India rather like yours. I was an ambitious young man and went to study literature in the United States. I then moved to Switzerland. Along the way, I worked in publishing, in marketing for the commercial sector and in communications for the Aga Khan Development Network. I published two books on the cultural history of Morocco. I had two sons. My first wife died. I suffered a heart attack. I remarried and added two more sons. I am almost 60 years old.

So this serendipitous but full life suggests I should have learned a variety of important things along the way and therefore have something to impart to you, as graduation speakers tend to do, something valuable – an approach to life that may speak to you.

At this pivotal moment in your lives, I would like to impress upon you the importance of being ethical throughout your life. I have learned in my life that it is far better – for your own self and for society – to do the right thing, even when the right thing is hard to do.

Since many of you will now go on to higher education, I would like to start by talking about an experiment at Princeton Theological Seminary, in the United States, in the 1970s. The experiment is about the Good Samaritan story, which is about someone who is beaten up by thieves and left for dead. He is ignored by others, but then someone stops and tends to the beaten man. You might already know the story, as it has become a standard in many societies. There are laws that are, appropriately, named “Good Samaritan” laws... But back to the Princeton story.

After telling everyone that they were to write an essay about the Good Samaritan, students in this particular class were told that they had to go over to the other side of the campus and present their essays. Some were told to hurry; others were told that there was plenty of time.

As they made their way across campus, a man who appeared to have been beaten up by thieves and possibly dying was placed in their path.

The experiment was to see who would stop and help the man – who would be the proverbial “Good Samaritan”. The researchers found a correlation between the haste of the students and the percentage of people who helped the man. Students in a hurry did not stop often: Only 10% helped the man. 40% of the students who were not in a hurry helped the man.

Perhaps most surprising is that 60% of the students who had time to help did not stop to do so.

The research begs the question: Is it more important to help another human being ... or to help yourself? I would argue that in the era that we now face, it is more important than ever to be the person who takes time for a stranger in need – the person who does the right thing. This is at the heart of being an ethical person.

So how exactly do we define what it means to be an ethical person? My parents, a surgeon and a nurse, provided a quiet, humble example. The Golden Rule, which suggests that you should treat others the way you would like to be treated, is another example. A guide that has attracted me is the ethical framework of the organisation I work for - the Aga Khan Development Network.

The first ethic contained within in it is Compassion. It says that the “poor, the deprived and those at the margin of existence have a moral right to society's compassion”. Think about that revolutionary principle: Poor people have a moral right to compassion. This principle applies to many places and things: Hospitals and schools, for example, as well as the conduct and work of government, of NGOs, of businesses.

The related conclusion is that compassion should be applied in ways that do not compromise a person’s dignity. We must respect a person’s dignity and avoid creating a culture of dependency by giving. I am reminded of Amartya Sen, who published “Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation” in 1981.

In studying the Bengal famine of 1943, during which 3 million people died, Sen felt that the famine did not occur only because there was a lack of food, but because of the inequalities of food distribution. It was a landmark contribution to the study of famine. It is important to note that after that famine, some people in the Indian government worked out these inequalities in distribution and saved many millions of lives in the process. There have been no GREAT famines like the Bengal famine in India since Independence.

Working out these solutions requires smart people – and I would count each one of you among that group. Be grateful for the intelligence that has got you to this point in life. Remember that being an ethical person includes taking care of your bright mind and your mental health. Many of you are going on to lives that will be important to all of us. Your brain is your gift to the world.

Your responsibility, as smart people, is also to be involved in the issues of the day. To do this effectively, you must have the leadership skills, the wisdom and the knowledge – not to mention a clear mind – to make the decisions that impact the lives of millions of people – in India, and around the world.

The Academy has been put here, I believe, for that purpose. Society is best served when it provides the space and the means for human beings to reach their fullest potential, regardless of their background. Education, and research, are the means by which individuals and societies reach that full potential. This school is therefore a means for you – and society at large – to reach both your – and its – full potential.

I should add that, in my experience, maximising everyone’s potential is best achieved in societies that welcome diversity – so we need to advocate for diversity. When we do not celebrate diversity, we are shutting out certain people who may contribute something vital to society. In the Upanishads, it says, “when he sees all creatures within his true Self, then jealousy, grief and hatred vanish.” In the Quran, it says that humankind has been created from

a single soul, as male and female, communities and nations, so that people may know one another. The greatest commandment for Christians is to “love your neighbour as yourself”.

A diverse and inclusive society also means one we can live in. Simply put, we should not ruin the planet. It is vital, now more than ever, to change our thinking about how our decisions impact the environment. I was pleased to run into kids from the junior school campaigning against the use of plastic.

If we want to save our home and leave your generation with a wholesome and sustainable social and physical environment, we need your help. Your solutions will help us get out of this mess. I am pleased to say that I met several students yesterday who I think can, and will.

And when we arrive in a position of power to do something – when we have the means to save our planet, or to have a positive impact on our world – it is our responsibility to not only act, but to be good trustees of resources that are meant for the benefit of others. We should be trustworthy and accountable.

I think I have covered the ethical framework that guides our work.

But back to the Good Samaritan story. People usually focus on the story, but they do not look into the person who helps. Did you know that Samaritans, who were once a fairly large group of people, were killed when they rebelled against the Byzantine Empire? Conversion to Christianity and Islam reduced their numbers even more. By the 12th Century, their numbers had dwindled to less than 2000 worldwide.

But their story of selflessness lives on. Think of the Good Samaritans of more modern times, like Ghandi, or Nelson Mandela. We are attracted to these people because they embody what it means to be ethical in life. They chose to do the right thing and made great sacrifices in the process ...

They advanced the common good rather than in helping themselves. They did not choose what was easy; they chose what was right. It is that spirit, of giving generously of oneself, that will make our world a better place.

As His Highness the Aga Khan said over 40 years ago:

“We have all seen examples of God’s most wonderful creature, the person, whether in a government bureau, a business, or a private development agency, who is inspired to give generously of himself, to go beyond the mechanical requirements of a task. Such men and women, paid or unpaid, express the spirit of the volunteer, literally the will to make a product better, a school the best, a clinic more compassionate and effective. Their spirit, generating new ideas, resisting discouragement, and demanding results, animates the heart of every effective society.”

I think the messages in that quote are clear:

- be an ethical leader
- be humble
- and give generously of yourself.

As I conclude these thoughts and congratulate you on your impressive achievements and bright futures, I thought I would connect you back to how I began this speech, which was a recitation

of the ups and downs of my life. Most people will live lives that contain both good times and bad times. So I would like to leave you with a little Rumi, the great 13th century Persian poet. This is a poem I have sent to my own sons when they have faced challenges in life - when they did not get into a particular university, or failed at a job interview or were not getting along with their girlfriend – and I hope that it will inspire you, on both the good days and the bad, as you continue on your own path. It is called “The Guest House”:

This being human is a guest house.
Every morning a new arrival.
A joy, a depression, a meanness,
some momentary awareness comes
As an unexpected visitor.
Welcome and entertain them all!
Even if they're a crowd of sorrows,
who violently sweep your house
empty of its furniture,
still treat each guest honourably.
He may be clearing you out
for some new delight.
The dark thought, the shame, the malice,
meet them at the door laughing and invite them in.
Be grateful for whoever comes,
because each has been sent
as a guide from beyond.

(translation by Coleman Barks ([The Essential Rumi](#)))

Thank you.

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