

**Doulaye Kone**

**AIT Graduation speech, May 19, 2019**

**All lives have equal values ....**

I was born in the savanna, up in the North of the Cote d'Ivoire, transported from the hospital back to the village in a pan (basket) on the head of my mom. This was the stroller at that time, still in use in many other places in the world. I was the second born among 6 surviving siblings. I was the first boy and my dad decided that I would be schooled.

At the age of 12-13, I was left on my own to live as an adult. Renting a one-room apartment with other kids, strategizing to get food every day until I received the good news that I was eligible for government scholarship and could enroll in the boarding school. From that moment, my life changed! I could shower three times a day, take a nap, have three meals per day, had a great place to sleep and more importantly I could spend most of my time playing all sort of sports with great friends.

**Hard work is always highly rewarding**

I learned earlier in my life, from my dad, that hard work is always greatly rewarding. This is how my father earned his financial independence, and became a highly respected wise voice in our

community. For me attending school was not only about learning new things, it was also about putting in a great performance to remain among the best. I needed the government scholarship to enjoy a privileged life! Indeed, at 13, I learned that ranking among the best students made eligible to government scholarships, that would provide me with food, a free playground and great shelter! Until my PhD degree, I was sponsored by the government. My family could not afford my middle class tuition fees. I was lucky to be born in a country where in those days education was a high priority in the government budget!

### **The meaning of environmental engineering: saving lives and reducing inequity**

Now that you know a bit of my personal life, I hope you will understand why in this graduation speech I am inviting each of you to be a great contributor in advancing human life, helping to reduce inequities around the world, building a better world for our generation and the next generation! All this is totally in your control!

From now on, you will be making important decisions that will impact your own lives and probably the lives of several hundred million if not a billion people. Whether you are an environmental engineer, or a scientist working to prevent pollution, building dams, working in a biotechnology company, mitigating climate changes effects, cleaning water or providing sanitation solutions, your work will have a deep impact on people's lives and wellbeing. You should be aspiring to put the people, and the most vulnerable among them- young children, girls, women - at the heart of what you are doing. I need you to remind yourself about the importance and the meaning of your work, whenever you are feeling down or don't understand the purpose of your job.

*It was only when I started university that I realized that people from my community, including my own siblings, were dying from preventable diseases like diarrhea, malaria, typhoid or diseases like river blindness, polio were causing serious handicap etc.! I was studying physics and chemistry, dreaming to be an astronaut, or at least a pilot or a chemist in a fragrance company. When I understood that it was possible to save lives working as an environmental and sanitary engineer, I was 23 and decided to change the course of my career. I was not going to become an astronaut anymore. But I was going to find a job or create a company that will be about eliminating preventable diseases. Yes, all my life I have been traumatized when people, family members, and siblings were dying in hospitals from totally preventable diseases.*

As environmental engineers and scientists, your work helps keeping people away from hospital. You will most probably not be recognized as such in your community, but this is the truth, your hard work will be greatly rewarded! You act before the medical doctors are called in. By doing your job well, your city becomes livable, it will attract investments, tourists and create more jobs, yes, it will shine from the sky! But most importantly, people will live happy as in a paradise.

So be brave! Go and change the world for better! Remember that conventional ideas don't change the world. You have to trust yourself, build the support team around you and challenge conventional thinking. Don't fight with some of your peers to impose a new idea, instead find others who are more open minded, less risk-averse to champion new ideas. You can spend your energy trying to convince the establishment, or you may use the same energy building a new generation of agents of change.

When you will be given the opportunity to develop a project for a poor community or a developing country, make sure that the solutions you will propose meet your own aspirations. Make sure that you yourself will be comfortable with the proposed technology or solution. Do not

repeat the mistake that many generations of engineers have made: to design products, services and technologies for the poor, which in majority of the cases end up as being non-viable. Poor people and rich people are all equal human being and their lives should be valued equally. If cost and price are the driving criteria for adoption, use market laws to develop innovative business models. But please don't try to sell substandard solutions, poor people have the same aspirations as any human being. Design for people, design to use it yourself!

To remain connected to society, you may want to identify issues you would want to support, either by donating your time, some money, by mentoring, coaching etc. Engaging in philanthropic activities can help you better understanding the purpose of your work, and probably help you making the right decisions in your career.

You are the next generation of engineers from AIT. Don't stay in a surrounding of only your peer-environmental engineers. AIT opens for you a larger network of expertise. Use it, tap it any time and as much as you can. But also, go beyond that network as well. Build bridges with other disciplines or with experts and artists to bring the best to the communities you will be serving. Bring your authenticity in the work you do. Be audacious, remain curious, and question the status quo, as you are now the new agent of change!

All the best, my dear colleagues!

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