The Importance of the Golden Rule

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An internationally known author and journalist, Friedman has won the Pulitzer Prize three times for his work at the New York Times. His foreign affairs column, which appears weekly, reports on US domestic politics and foreign policy, Middle East conflicts, international economics, the environment, biodiversity and energy. He is the author six best-selling books.
I'm tempted to simply say, see previous speeches, thank you very much. I really, I appealed to Victoria. I said, don't show me up. Please, don't show me up. Sarah's showed me up. Rick's showed me up. It's a treat and an honor to be here today, and I've been to Olin before. Rick has hosted me here. But being back here today and listening to Victoria and Sarah and Rick, I only appreciate more what a really unique place this is. And what a unique honor it is.

I'm going to really pick up where Sarah left off, because as I reflected on what to say this afternoon, it occurred to me that during your time here, they probably taught you how to build bridges. And anyone who has studied America’s infrastructure problem and our $2 trillion infrastructure deficit knows we need to fix and upgrade so many of our bridges across rivers, highways and valleys. But as I thought about that, I started to wonder if they also taught you how to build the other bridges we now so desperately need in the country and in our world, the bridges between human beings, especially people who look and behave differently from you or me, but are our neighbors and will be our work collaborators. I can’t teach you anything on how to build a bridge across a highway, but I would like to share with you a few thoughts about the vital importance of building and community-building, and while I’m at it, the vital importance of the Golden Rule.

To appreciate why I think all these are so important for your generation, we need to step back a few years. I've lost track of what your generation is called — Y? X? Millennials? But for me, you are all the children of 2007. We all are, actually. You see, there are vintage years in wine, and there are vintage years in history. And this odd, not very sexy-sounding year, 2007, which was completely overwhelmed by the Great Recession of 2008, was actually one of the all-time vintage years in modern history. Let’s just review what happened in 2007.

Steve Jobs introduced the iPhone in 2007, which today has put a small Internet-enabled computer into the hands of several billion people. In 2007, a company called Hadoop was started, named after the founder’s son’s toy elephant. An innocuous-sounding company, which managed to create the software that tied together millions of computers, basically paving the way for the big data revolution. In 2007, an open source platform for writing and collaborating on software called GitHub was launched, helping enable software, as Netscape founder Mark Andreessen said, to begin eating the world. On September 26, 2006, an organization called Facebook, a social network site that had been popular at college campuses and high schools, was open to everyone at least 13 years old with a valid email address, and began to scale globally in 2007.

In 2007, an obscure microblogging company called Twitter, which had been part of a broader start-up, was spun off on its own separate platform, and also started to scale globally. In 2007, a company called Google launched a strange-sounding mobile operating system called Android, an open standards platform for devices that would help smartphones globally scale with an alternative operating
system to the iPhone. In 2007, AT&T, the iPhone’s exclusive connectivity provider, shifted to software-enabled networks — gobbledegook it may seem to you, but that rapidly allowed it to expand its capacity to handle all the cellular traffic created by the iPhone, traffic that grew an unfathomable 100,000 percent in five years. In 2007, a company called Amazon released something called the Kindle, accelerating the e-book revolution. In 2007, four roommates in San Francisco with some air mattresses started a company called Airbnb. Two years later, Uber would follow in their footsteps. And in 2007, a company called Intel announced that its 45 nanometer technology for microchips — which for the first time introduced non-silicon materials known as high-K metal gates into its microprocessors—thus enabling Intel to continue pushing Moore’s law into the future.

In short, boys and girls, 2007 was one giant inflection point. And it was what really scaled this thing we call the cloud, where all of these technologies merged and reinforced each other. I don’t like to use the term “the cloud.” It sounds so soft, so fluffy, so benign. It sounds like a Joni Mitchell song. I’ve looked at clouds from both sides now. This ain’t no cloud. It’s actually what Craig Mundie, Microsoft’s former head of research, called to me one day a supernova. It is a computational supernova. NASA defines a supernova as the explosion of a star, the largest explosion that takes place in space. The only difference is that while a supernova is a one-time incredible release of energy, this technology supernova just keeps releasing energy at an exponentially accelerating rate. Because all of its critical components are steadily being driven down in cost and up in performance at an accelerating rate. It is, I believe, the greatest release of energy into the hands of human beings since electricity and fire. And you are here to receive it. Always remember, someone was alive when Gutenberg invented the printing press. And some monk said to some priest, “Now that is really cool. OK? You mean, I don’t have to write all these bibles out longhand?”

Well, you are here at another such inflection point. And it’s changing four kinds of power right before your eyes. It’s changing the power of machines, which now have all five senses. It’s changing the power of one. What one person can do now is amazing. It’s changing the power of many. We as a collective are now a force of and in nature. We’ve even got a geological era being named after us. The Anthropocene. And lastly, it’s changing the power of ideas and flows, which now circulate globally at a velocity we’ve never seen before.

This huge amplification of the power of one, the power of machines, the power of many and the power of flows has quickly brought humanity to an intersection we’ve actually never been at before as a species. Yes, ever since 8:15 a.m. on the morning of August 6, 1945, when an American B-29 bomber dropped an atomic weapon on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, triggering the nuclear arms race, we’ve been living in a world where a single government could conceivably destroy the whole planet and kill all of us. We are entering a world, with the rising power of one and the rising power of machines, where one person could kill us all. We’re not there yet, but we’re heading there. It’s in our sights.

And yet at the very same time, at the very same junction, we’re approaching a world where if we so choose, we could
actually fix everything. That is, acting together, we could actually feed, clothe and shelter every person, cure virtually every disease, increase the free time of virtually every person, educate virtually every child, and enable virtually everyone to realize their full potential, if we put our minds to it. We have never been at such an intersection before as a species, where one of us could kill all of us, and all of us could fix everything.

Because what is really naïve, naïve in the extreme, is to continue thinking that we’re going to have a stable world with so much amplified power being distributed to so many people by not working together, and by not building more bridges between us, and by not scaling the golden rule. Doing random acts of kindness to strangers, taking in a few extra refugees in times of crisis, working with other nations on global climate — everything that generates trust — and using connections and community that anchor and bind us together are the most strategic things you can do right now. It will matter more than ever when the power of one and the power of machines gets this amplified, and those are the bridges I hope you will build.

What does bridge-building actually look like? There’s a rabbinc legend that I think illustrates it so profoundly. A rabbi once asked his students, “How do we know when night has ended and day has begun?” The students thought they grasped the importance of this question. There are, after all, prayers and rites and rituals that can only be done at nighttime. And there are prayers and rites and rituals that can only be done by day. So it is important to know how we can tell when night has ended and day has begun.

So the first and brightest of the students offered an answer. “Rabbi, when I look at out at the fields, and I can distinguish between my field and the field of my neighbor, that’s when the night has ended, and the day has begun.” The second student offered his answer. “Rabbi, when I look from the fields, and I see a house, and I can tell that it’s my house and not the house of my neighbor, that’s when the night has ended, and the day has begun.” A third student offered another answer. “Rabbi, when I see an animal in the distance, and I can tell what kind of animal it is, whether a cow or a horse or a sheep, that’s when night has ended, and the day has begun.” Then a fourth student offered yet another answer. “Rabbi, when I see a flower, and I can make out the colors of the flower, whether they’re red or yellow or blue, that’s when night
has ended, and day has begun.”

Each answer brought a sadder, more severe frown to the Rabbi’s face, until he finally shouted, “No, none of you understands. You only divide. You divide your house from the house of your neighbor, your field from your neighbor’s field. You distinguish one kind of animal from another. You separate one color from all the others. Is that all we can do, dividing, separating, splitting the world into pieces? Isn’t the world broken enough? Isn’t the world split into enough fragments? Is that what Torah is for? No, my dear students. It’s not that way, not that way at all.”

The shocked students looked into the sad face of their rabbi. “Then Rabbi, tell us. How do we know that night has ended, and the day has begun?” The rabbi stared back into the faces of his students, and with a voice suddenly gentle and imploring, he responded, “When you look into the face of the person who is beside you, and you can see that person is your brother or your sister, then finally the night has ended, and the day has begun. That is what it means to build bridges between human beings.”

So let me close with a movie review. My favorite movie this year was all about science and engineering. But what I liked about it had nothing to do with the science and engineering. The movie was *The Martian*, about a US astronaut, played by Matt Damon, who gets accidentally left for dead by his fellow crew members on Mars. My favorite scene was when NASA has to quickly assemble a rocket to ferry critical supplies to its stranded astronaut on Mars, but the rocket explodes shortly after takeoff, because there were no Olin engineers working on it. Because of sloppy assembly.

As NASA scrambles for another solution — it takes a long time to build a rocket — the movie suddenly cuts to the inner sanctum of China’s National Space Agency. Two ranking Chinese officials discuss what China could possibly do to help the hopeless situation, and how it might play out for China politically and diplomatically and financially if they did. They just so happen to have a rocket all ready to go. But because China’s space program is so secretive, no one else in the world knows they have this rocket. So if they don’t offer to help, no one would be the wiser. But the Chinese, in an unprompted act of international collaboration, decide to help save the US astronaut marooned on Mars, save him from starvation by offering their delivery rocket to get the Martian his desperately needed care package. At the end of the movie, you see the leaders of China’s space program applauding side by side with NASA’s as the rescue mission succeeds.

I know it is just Hollywood. But that scene warmed my heart, and I was not alone. In many movie theaters, it was reported, audiences spontaneously applauded at that scene. It reminds you of what could have been and what can be — and, I would argue, what needs to be if we’re going to stably govern this post-2007 world and collaborate to solve the scale problems we face as a species, most notably climate change and mass human migrations.

So please go forth into the world and build bridges across those highways, railroad tracks, rivers and valleys. Lord knows we need them. But save a little time and energy each day to build or repair a bridge to another human being. I had a chance to interview the Surgeon General of the United States last week, the remarkable Vivek Murthy. And I asked him, “Dr. Murthy, what is the biggest disease we face in America today?” And without hesitation he answered, “It’s not cancer. It’s not heart disease. It’s isolation. It is the pronounced isolation that so many people are experiencing that is the great pathology of our lives today.”

So work in your community, join the PTA, invigorate civic institutions wherever you find them: public schools, public parks, public libraries, city councils. Build bridges,
not walls, that help you and everyone around you feel more connected, respected and protected. That is how we raise the odds that more of the powers bequeathed to us in 2007 will go toward fixing everything rather than harming everyone. We have much work to do. But as my friend Tom Burke, the British environmentalist, likes to say, it’s the doing we do together that matters the most, because big, hard problems can only be fixed by working together, and because by working together, you can actually see that the person next to you is your brother or your sister, and therefore night has ended, and a better day has begun. But just one postscript. You can start practicing this trick at home. Whenever I have the honor of giving a college graduation speech, I always end with this story about the legendary University of Alabama football coach, Bear Bryant. Late in his career, after his mother had died, South Central Bell Telephone Company asked Bear Bryant to do a TV commercial. As best I can piece together, the commercial was supposed to be a very simple thing, just a little music and Bear Bryant saying in his tough coach’s voice, “Have you called your mama today?” On the day of the filming, though, he decided to ad lib something. He reportedly looked into the camera and said, “Have you called your mama today? I sure wish I could call mine.” And that was how the commercial ran. And it got a huge response from audiences. So if you take one thing away from this talk this afternoon, take this. Call your mother. Regularly. And your father. And your friends. And your neighbor. You’ll be glad you did. I know, I know, it sounds sort of naïve. But it’s actually the new realism. Thank you very much.