

IMSA: Musings on past, present and future

Thank you so much for inviting me to speak to you as you embark on the 2022-23 school year. I am truly humbled to be here. This is an honor and I hope that I am up to the task.

First - a little history about me. I graduated in 1993. As this is a mathematics academy let me do that math for you. I started my senior year exactly 30 years ago. In those 30 years I've had a pretty traditional path. Went to college at Harvey Mudd, got a CS degree, worked for Microsoft and then Google. Started a big open source project (Kubernetes), started a company and then sold it. Along the way I met and married my wonderful wife Rachel and we have two kids and a dog. But just 2 months ago I retired and I'm now at a crossroads trying to figure out what I want to do with the rest of my life.

Many of you are also at a crossroads. We are separated by 30 years but face some of the same excitement and anxiety about the future. For those just starting at IMSA this is an exciting time. You have the opportunity to grow and stretch yourselves in ways that, I'm sure, are unclear to you right now. For those that will be graduating you are getting ready to launch into the world. **No matter how careful a planner you are, you can't plan for what is ahead of you.** For those that are in the middle - every new year of school is a crisp new notebook ready for you to write your story.

One more caveat as I jump in: I am a sample size of one. **My path will not be your path.** I have privileges and headwinds that are unique to me. I'm an old-ish rich white dude. Please take these comments in that spirit. Take what is useful to you and apply it as you see best.

Past

Looking towards the past, we are all the product of our experiences and those around us. We must pay homage to the people that got us here. None of us is alone. Please look around at the people on stage here, those at home that stood by you through ups and downs and those that supported and encouraged you. Every single one of them believes in making a better world and has dedicated a portion of their limited time on this earth to helping you.

To those people I'd like to say 'Thank You'. My parents, unfortunately, are unable to join me today but I'll be sure to show them the video afterwards so I want to extend a special Thank You to them.

I also want to acknowledge that being a teenager is hard. All of us, no matter the distance, look back at our former selves with a mixed sense of pride and embarrassment. **While your past selves are a part of what makes you, you are not your past selves.** The joy and stress of growing up is living that change and giving yourself permission to learn and grow.

"No [person] ever steps in the same river twice, for it's not the same river and [they are] not the same person." That quote is attributed to Heraclitus - an ancient Greek philosopher that lived 2500 years ago. I find it comforting that something from the depths of time can still be relevant to us today.

Beyond that, many of us were raised as being "gifted". At least that was the term that was used 30 years ago. This often comes with outsized expectations. I remember, when I was a teenager, talk about being a future leader. The weight of the world seemed to rest on my shoulders. That is a unique challenge that many in this room face. Mine and previous generations have left you a world with many problems and the expectation is on you to fix them. I'm sorry. I am confident that you will fix them but you don't have to do it alone. Please be kind to yourself. You have a long journey ahead of you and you need to build a sustainable life. When looking at history, there is what is called the "Great Man Theory". I don't subscribe to it. We are all part of a large system that is our world. You can and will influence it but you aren't responsible for driving it. It is ok to say "I don't know."

Present

Let's shift and talk about the present. I MSA is a special place. I'm overjoyed, honestly, that it is still around and has become an ongoing institution in Illinois. This wasn't assured! The early days of I MSA were filled with a lot of uncertainty. Heck, when we first showed up our hall wasn't built yet! The first several months had a bunch of us packed into the main building. That was quite the experience!

For me, I didn't have a great time at school before I came to I MSA. It was only at I MSA that I found people that I could really relate to. You have the opportunity here to find your people. It was at I MSA that I was able to discover who I am through the friends and connections I made here.

IMSA also represents the best of what Illinois (and soon beyond!) has to offer. This institution draws from all over the state. From all walks of life and backgrounds. Expand your definition of "finding your people" beyond the obvious and look for deeper commonality and connection. **There are abundant opportunities to learn from your fellow students.** I grew up in the suburbs - Glen Ellyn. Coming to IMSA made it possible for me to meet and really get to know folks from all over the state - rural and urban. I really treasure that.

Beyond academics, this is a chance to start building skills that will serve you for the rest of your life. Looking back at the last 30 years for me, I find some surprises. There are things that I started learning at IMSA that have served me well in life and in my career.

First is becoming a good communicator. Emerson said "Build a better mousetrap, and the world will beat a path to your door". I don't find this to be true, necessarily. **Genius, in isolation, is not impactful.** You need to know how to make your ideas accessible to others.

Second is the value of community. In the software industry there is the myth of the 10x engineer. This is, supposedly, an engineer that is 10 times as productive as others. Oftentimes this is used to excuse those that don't work well with others. In my mind, however, the true 10x engineers are those that make others around them better. The impact you can have through a community is much greater than the impact you can have alone. **Seek out mentors and advocates. And, in turn, find opportunities to mentor and advocate for others.**

Finally there is empathy. We all struggle. Sometimes It is obvious for the world to see and sometimes it is hidden.

Practice listening. When you hear something you don't agree with dig deeper and listen harder.

Having someone explain their experience to you is a gift. You can't demand it. You shouldn't question it and you should thank those that are sharing it with you.

Future

Finally, let's talk about the future. What will your next 30 years look like? I don't know so I'll leave you with some generic advice.

You have agency. When you are in school the path forward often looks formulaic. Your grades in a class are based on the quizzes and tests. You have to have so many credits to graduate. You have to check all the boxes to put together a compelling college application. As you enter the working world it is often the same. You work as a junior whatever to "pay your dues".

Be thoughtful about when and how you decide to play this game. Define what success means for you. I know many people (myself included) that did the obvious thing and ended up in a place that they didn't want to be. An example, for me, was deciding if I wanted to continue to be an "individual contributor" and focus on technology and building vs becoming a manager. In the tech world it is often the more obvious path to move into management. But, for me, staying closer to the technical systems was more personally rewarding.

Finally, **find positive sum situations.** "Positive-sum" situations are those in which the sum of winnings and losses is greater than zero. Many people see the only way to win as being to beat other people. That is such a limited way to view the world! Whenever you enter any sort of negotiation, find a way for everyone to come out the other side feeling like they are winning. You will both be happier and be surrounded by happier people. For me this is a critical way to build and participate in a community, it is also the only way out of the various messes that we find ourselves in today.

Conclusion

As I wrap up I want to again thank you for having me here. I owe I MSA so much and I'd like to pay it forward. If any of you want to dig deeper into the things I've talked about today or, in any other way, mine my experience and expertise please reach out.

I believe in you. Not only to do amazing things but also to be true to yourselves as you embark on this amazing journey together.