"Be Naked As Often As Possible": Anthropological Advice

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Today we are gathered to mark the passage from student to graduate – simultaneously celebrating your achievements but also clearing the way for the next stage in all of your lives. So I want to begin by recognizing today's graduates – CONGRATULATIONS! This is a big thing and is every bit as special as it feels. I also want to recognize all the people who I suspect have made today possible: friends, family, loved ones, colleagues, peers, faculty and staff. It might take a village to raise a child, but I know it takes nearly as much to finish a dissertation! So in case someone in the audience forgets to tell you: THANK YOU and CONGRATULATIONS too! I also want to thank the School of Information for inviting me to share this day and to speak at this commencement – it is a rare and daunting pleasure.

Ten years ago, almost to the day, I sat in the sculpture garden at Stanford University and received my own PhD, in cultural anthropology. I don't remember anything the commencement speaker said. It was hot, much like today, and I was exhausted and overwhelmed and giddy, as I suspect many of you must be now. But I was lucky enough to have dear friends and family with me to mark what was, for all intents and purposes, a significant rite of passage in my life. And like many other rites of passage, everyone had an opinion about how I should be feeling and what I should do next. I don't want to add to that chorus, for I know how frustrating that can be. Instead what I want to do is offer some very anthropological advice – the kind we give to students as they embark on their first fieldwork projects, leaving our universities and research labs for new places and new experiences.

Anthropologists, it turns out, are full of advice. What do the following statements all have in common: "The safest seat is always the one directly behind the driver." "Take 10 grams of quinine every night and keep off the women." "Walk in cheap sandshoes, the water runs out of them faster". And "Always lie to customs officials"? Well, they are all pieces of advice given by anthropologists to would-be anthropologists before they set off to the field. My mother was cautioned not to drown in data and always to carry her own water. Seeking guidance before his first fieldtrip to Papua New Guinea, one of my colleagues was told: "be naked as often as possible". As it turns out, this is medical advice – being naked allows one to check for leeches and bugs and prevent all manner of unpleasant growths and fungal infections.

Leeches, bugs and unpleasant medical issues are familiar things to me – I had taken quinine, and had had scabies, trachoma and head-lice (self-imported to my head) before I was ten. I grew up in the field, in my mother's fieldsites in Australia. She is an anthropologist too and we joke in my family that anthropology is less a career and more a way of being in the world. Perhaps it is no surprise then that my earliest and most vivid memories are cultural in nature: the feel of a Balinese dance costume as I was bound in to it and discovered I could no longer bend in the middle; the stories from elderly men and women who remembered what their part of Australia was like before European settlers arrived; the smoky smell of animal fat and ochre as Aboriginal women painted their country on my body; the moment when I realized that I was expected to be, as they would say at Ali-Curang, "boss for myself" – and I was only eight. Even as a child, this is what I knew anthropology to be – it changed you forever. Today, it is still those moments when the unfamiliar pierces me that I treasure: the sweet taste of fresh-water fish from the Coorong served at a Ngarrinderi wake; the call to *salat* rising above the ceaseless sounds of Jakarta's traffic; the sight of hundreds of tiny decaying plastic Buddhas at a Pusan temple, each one

represented someone's personal prayer or hope. And what distinguishes these moments from a stream of photos on Flickr or at a retro slide night is the way it felt for me to be there and how challenging it was to see the world through other people's eyes.

I am often asked how I ended up at Intel – as it seemed then an unlikely career choice for such an anthropologist. As some of you know, I met a man in a bar in Palo Alto. He owned a start-up and had connections at Intel. He claimed to be intrigued by what I did and concerned about my future, I took this to be a fairly standard bar ploy and went home, alone. Although I did not give him my name or number, he tracked me down to Stanford the next day and offered me a job. The rest, as they say, is history. The moral of this story is "Don't give your number to strange men in bars – if they want to find you they will anyway."

The early days at Intel were exhausting: I had a policy of saying 'yes' to everything and as a result, I spent a lot of time trying to explain to engineers and computer scientists why people were important and why knowing something about what they cared about could fundamentally shape the way new technology was developed. I spent seven years doing that. I did fieldwork in Asia and Europe and spent time in the homes of hundreds of different families getting a sense of what made them tick and what they cared about. It was a remarkable privilege. These days, I am the Director of User Experience within Intel's Digital Home Group. I manage an inter-disciplinary team of social scientists, interaction designers and human factors engineers. We strive to stay ahead of Intel's technology roadmap. We use the insights gained for in-depth ethnographic and design research to help drive innovations in and around Intel platforms. And we create technology that responds to human needs, desires and aspirations. And when I get a chance, I still do fieldwork.

Before I embarked on my very first fieldwork trip, I went to my advisor seeking guidance, something memorable and apt. After all, thirty years before his supervisor had advised him, "Arthur, take a slow boat to China" and he did. His slow boat trip helped create the necessary break between the daily routines and regimes of life as a graduate student at Cornell, and the days of walking through rice-paddies in Taiwan interviewing elderly Han women about their fertility patterns over a lifetime. It created a moment, an interstices in which he could change gears. And I so wanted that same kind of sage advice from him. But he sent me to his wife. Drawing on prior experiences with a student detained at the Chinese border because the nature of her underwear suggested sex worker not social scientist, my supervisor's wife told me to "Wear underwear appropriate for the occasion." It was his wife's guidance about underwear, and Arthur's injunction "and remember Genevieve show it to no one" that would be my fieldwork advice story. Given that I did fieldwork in Washington DC in the mid-1990s when a glimpse of the 'wrong underwear' was nearly enough to bring down a president, in retrospect I should be more grateful.

So I won't tell you to take a slow boat to China, though it could be a marvelous thing to do, and I am going to assume that you have already learnt the necessary lessons about underwear and nakedness. What I wanted to do instead is give you the advice that I give my own students – my own cheat sheet, if you will, about how best to do fieldwork. Now, I know that the lives ahead of you are clearly not fieldwork. You will not, for instance, get a National Science Foundation grant to do your laundry and chances are you will not write papers on the basis of your experiences navigating the minutiae of taxation forms, workforce safety or the tenure ladder. But in so far as you are embarking on a new passage from where you have been and that which is familiar to something which will be a little less so, and which will transform you, fieldwork advice might come in handy anyway.

I have four ways of being that I think are important for good fieldwork experiences and for life after graduate school. I think you have to be present, vulnerable, surprised and brave.

A young woman I meet in India once told me that to be Indian was to know it through the tips of your fingers – it was about how it felt to put your hand into a biriyani. Teaching me about India then meant feeding me. Anthropologists like to get in the middle of things this way – it is how we learn, it is why we go to the field and why we stay there and why we put such a premium on really being there too. When I am in the field, I take the contemporary equivalent of a slow boat to China. I turn off my mobile phone, I log off the computer and the internet. I read the local papers, I eat local food, I keep local hours, I talk to anyone who will listen, and I listen to anyone who will talk! For all of you, I hope this means you have the opportunity to know a place through your finger tips; to be intimately and persistently immersed in the places you will call home. Walk its streets if you can; know the way it smells and sounds, discover the local secrets and keep them. In so doing, I hope you can achieve a balance of online and offline encounters with the people, spaces and practices around you. I hope you can be fully engaged with local issues and the ways in which global ones are manifested around you. And I hope you experience moments of profound dislocation and discomfort – when things aren't familiar – because I firmly believe it is in those moments that we learn the most about ourselves and what we truly value.

Moments of being overwhelmed are, for me, another critical part of being in the field and achieving them is another piece of advice I would offer you. One of the hardest things for most anthropologists in doing fieldwork is letting go of any sense that you know what is going on. My mother writes about the ways in which the aboriginal women with whom she worked could not believe that a woman her age did not know how to hunt and kill iguana or track animals. In Asia, many families with whom I worked worried that I did not have a husband and went to great

lengths to secure one for me. But it was a shaman in Korea who reminded me in a powerful and unexpected way that being in the field also means being vulnerable, in part because you cannot always anticipate what will happen next. We were sitting in her *anbang* on white cotton covered mattresses eating watermelon – it was summer and hot in Seoul. She had been talking about the visions she has had all her life and her mission to appropriately honor the souls of the Korean War dead she believes still haunt her country. She turned to me and said, "you are haunted too, aren't you". And I knew she meant my grandfather who died when I was 13, and there, in front of one of my research assistants and several other strangers, I just cried. Tears streamed down my face and I couldn't stop them and no one in that room minded. I tell my students and my employees that if they aren't in tears, like this, at least once in the field, then they really aren't embracing the experience. And I suppose in the weeks and months ahead there are going to moments of overwhelming frustration and hopefully joy but, like my students, you have to be willing to be open to it all. Most of you have lived parts of your lives online, in ways my cohort and that of my parents could not imagine – though many of them embrace it now. But I am suggesting a different kind of openness and vulnerability. One that engages you and decenters you, requires you not to be at the center of attention or a social network. This kind of vulnerability, or humility, brings with it grace.

Maintain your ability to be surprised – this takes work but is another important part of how to be in the world and another piece of anthropological advice I would give you. Experiencing surprise is a really good thing as it marks the moments when we encounter the stuff that doesn't fit into our world views. It is when our assumptions are most clearly revealed, allowing us to move past them. I encourage my students and my employees to work on being curious, about everything, You have to willing to ask stupid questions, to look foolish, so that you can also be surprised. You have to ask, as I did once in Malaysia, "so are your dead relatives calling you then?" I had

just found a replica mobile phone made of colored cardboard in a funerary goods store and I was inquiring how such things functioned. In Chinese culture, paper objects are burnt during a particular annual festival to take care of deceased relatives – fire transforms the paper objects into real objects in the afterlife. And in Malaysia the after-life is teaming with new technology – mobile phones, flat panel TVs, karaoke machines, laptops. And it turns out the dead are calling each other, on newly upgraded cell phones with lots of prepaid minutes. This was a wonderfully revelatory surprise and helped me rethink the ways technology fits into people's lives, both here and in the afterlife. But what will surprise look like for you? I hope it means that you can cultivate a strong sense of curiosity and an ability to ask the questions that lead to the moments of surprise. I hope it means that you can find ways to ask the 'stupid questions' about new technologies, information systems and socio-technical practices. The questions that challenge the received wisdoms: is social networking a good thing? Will having access to the internet and laptops improve the lives of kids living in developing nations? Who is really on the other side of the digital divide? Do people really want to be constantly connected? I hope you can also find ways to stay curious and never to assume that you know it all, because you don't!

And last but no least, in my anthropological advice giving, I urge you to be honest and brave. For anthropologists this means staying true to the stories we were told in the field, and keeping the details and nuances however inconvenient and contradictory they might be. It also means telling those stories in a way that is open and accessible. I remind my students and my employees that they have a responsibility to get it right – that when someone shares the details of their lives with you – you have a duty of care to do the right thing with that information. At Intel this means I have fought very hard to give presentations that honored the people whose homes I had visited. I learnt to resist answering questions like: "what are the three key-takeaways about China". Instead I insisted that you had to know about history, and culture, and politics and perhaps then the right

answers would be clearer. It has meant, over the years, that we have haunted Intel with images, photos and stories of the people who would never make it to the corridors of the corporation. We have tried to give them voice. For all of you, I hope that this might mean owning being experts and managing the power it accords you – but with humility not arrogance. I hope it means asking the hard questions and not giving the easy answers. And I hope it means telling complicated stories not just delivering sound-bites. But most of all, I hope it means speaking truth to power.

And we have a lot of that to do.

For many of you, the next part of your life will unfold here, in the United States, and here we are in a moment of extraordinary flux. It might even be historic. Our daily papers (and news websites) carry stories about new market dynamics and dependencies, an economic recession, a renewed interest in sustainability and resource management, shifting global forces and relationships, and the prospect of a change, any change, in the White House. Running through all these stories, sometimes warp, sometimes weft, are new technologies. The internet, mobile phones, social networking, virtual worlds, email, digital images, gaming consoles, and even spam, zombies and viruses are all implicated.

For those of us who work at the intersections of every-day life and technology development, and all of you who graduate today are counted in that rank, we have a responsibility to make these stories more complicated. We should tell the stories about the role the internet plays in shaping our world, but we must also tell the stories about how the internet isn't really changing anything. We have to be critical and smart and engaged. We have to create and nurture the places to ask questions and the people who can do so.

Now I know those are big asks. And I remember what it feels like to be in this audience and just to be grateful you survived the process. But one of things about rites of passage is that accompanying all that celebration, is also the bestowing of new roles and responsibilities. I hope you find them as challenging and as liberating as I did. And I hope my little bit of anthropological advice helps. For this is how I want to know the world: present, vulnerable, curious and brave. And it is how, if I could have my way, that you would all know it too!

Thank you!