

The Pledge

We're living in a unique time. Advances in information technology have made us increasingly aware of how our lives and the world are changing. In the eyes of many, the prognosis is not good: issues from the genocide in Darfur to the changing climate evoke images of a world in distress. But is our species really headed for decline?

I don't think it is.

In fact, I believe that in times of trouble, the positive actions of determined individuals are what will see us through. Over 20 years ago during the Cold War, a group of students at Humboldt State University in California decided this, too. They created a pledge in support of their idea, and the text became known as the Graduation Pledge:

I pledge to explore and take into account the social and environmental consequences of any job I consider and will try to improve these aspects of any organizations for which I work.

The next year, students at 20 other schools took the Pledge. Today, schools across the country, from Stanford to Harvard, are members of the Graduate Pledge Alliance.

The Pledge is not a call to a specific ideology. Instead, its power lies in its call for something far more important and general: consciousness. Consciousness is an awareness of the world, an awareness of oneself, and an understanding of how the two relate. Our increasingly connected world is changing faster than ever, and society needs people who can explore the consequences of their work and be leaders for positive change.

In a very general sense, we all work for someone or something. We might not get paychecks from our high schools or colleges or even our internships, but we all reflect the values of organizations we belong to. More importantly, our organizations reflect who we are and what we value. In a world where fashions and gadgets and ideas come and go constantly, we have to determine what we

really believe and then ask ourselves if our organizations align with our values. We must determine where we stand.

For scientists and engineers, this is especially important. Modern society depends on the creations made possible by advances in science and technology. The question we must ask is not whether science and technology should advance (they always do), but in what direction we wish them to advance and what our roles are in that movement. The governing equations that describe the universe can be applied toward many ends—equations of fluid flow are just as valid for a missile tailfin as they are for an airliner winglet or the long slender blade of a wind turbine. It was this realization that caused me to ask myself how I wanted to apply what I was learning in college. Every action we take is an expression of our human values, and I wanted to express the values of love, respect, appreciation, and care. This is why I took the Pledge at MIT.

The Pledge expresses one key idea: a person who considers the consequences of her or his actions and acts accordingly is better for the world than a person who doesn't. Students at dozens of universities across the world, and even some high schools, take the Pledge to publicly express commitment to themselves, to the world, and to continuous inquiry. The challenges that we face on a global scale can be overwhelming, but they will not be defeated unless we join together and act. Consider joining or starting a Pledge program at your school or the university you will attend, and share how important it is to see the bigger picture. ■



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To learn more about the Graduate Pledge Alliance, visit www.graduationpledge.org.

by Christopher Sequeira

