

Remarks by World Bank Group President Jim Yong Kim at Brown University: 'What is to be done, and what will I do?'

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What is to be done, and what will I do?

Confronting the biggest challenges of our time

What a pleasure it is to be back at Brown to celebrate our 250th anniversary. We are all so proud that Brown remains one of the world's leading institutions of higher learning. I'm confident that under President Paxson, Brown's role will grow further still. She understands that academic institutions have an unshakeable responsibility to inspire students as they think about and confront the world's most important problems.

The fundamental questions that drove me when I was a student remain the questions we must ask ourselves today:

What is to be done in the world, and what will I do?

Every one of us, in one form or another, must address these questions. The enormity of the challenges we face force us to do so.

I grew up in Iowa in the 1960s and 70s. My parents always encouraged me to strive for excellence and impact. But they had different ways of doing so. My father was a dentist. He taught me the concrete, practical things I needed to do in order to succeed in life. I remember the day when I returned home from Brown for the first time. When we were driving home, my father asked me, "So, what are you thinking of studying?"

I told him I was excited about philosophy and political science and that I thought I could make a difference in the world. I told him I was thinking of going into politics.

My father put on the blinker, pulled off the road, and turned off the car.

We sat there for a moment in silence, before he turned to me in the back seat and said, "Look, once you finish your medical residency, you can do anything you want."

You see, my father knew all about uncertainty. He'd grown up in Korea during a gruesome civil war, and he worried that his own children, who grew up in America, would not understand the importance of having a skill.

My mother took a different approach. She's a philosopher. She taught me from an early age to care deeply about issues of social justice, politics, and what was happening around the world. My mother stressed human empathy and the importance of history and culture in shaping economic and political outcomes. She used to say, "you have to act in the world with a sense of eternity." What she meant was that she wanted each of her children to do something that would be remembered forever.

She also introduced me to the American civil rights movement, and in particular to the teachings and speeches of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. One of my most vivid memories is sitting in our living room and watching Dr. King on television. I was moved by his words, especially when he said, "The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

Inspired by Dr. King, I knew I wanted to bend the arc of history toward justice and fight institutionalized discrimination. But my horizons were limited. Most of my friends and teachers were more interested in the upcoming Iowa Hawkeyes game than the race riots of 1968 or the war in Vietnam. I enrolled at the University of Iowa as a freshman, but I couldn't shake my dreams of being part of a larger world.

I transferred to Brown my sophomore year and after that, nothing was the same. I found a home at the Third World Center, where I quickly learned that I was not the only kid who ever felt like an outsider. Some of my new friends had grown up in really tough situations. Some were from Bedford-Stuyvesant and Harlem, which were very different in those days. They had endured racist taunts. They were poor and their families lived on food stamps. Their mothers worked two jobs and had little time to spend at home.

Their stories shaped me. They gave me a powerful sense of what it meant to struggle in the United States: to choose between meals or medicine, joining gangs or becoming a target of

gangs, resignation or resistance - all in the richest country in the world. They motivated me to take action.

One parents weekend, my friends from the Third World Center and I dressed up in black and marched around campus, protesting the university's decision to raise tuition without increasing financial aid for students who needed it. We won concessions on that issue, which eventually led Brown to adopt a need-blind admissions policy.

From that moment on, I was hooked. I realized that activism could drive social change. What a sense of empowerment! By the time I graduated in 1982, I started thinking beyond the change that I could affect in Providence. I asked myself, once again, "What is to be done in the world? And what will I do?"

Today, 32 years later, having co-founded Partners In Health, worked at the World Health Organization, Harvard University, and Dartmouth College, and now in my role as president of the World Bank Group, I can look back with greater clarity and propose some answers to those fundamental questions.

What is to be done? At the World Bank Group, we've set goals to end extreme poverty by 2030 and to boost shared prosperity for the bottom 40 percent in every developing country. These goals will drive our work going forward. But three major challenges will determine whether we succeed.

The first is achieving inclusive economic growth. Today, most countries have turned to the market to accelerate growth, and are focused on adopting policies that enable businesses to invest, grow, and create jobs. Indeed, the private sector is now the source of 90 percent of job creation in developing countries, and very few governments continue to promote an exclusively state-led approach to economic development. The communist parties of China and Vietnam, for example, are deeply engaged in improving their competitiveness in the global capitalist system.

Even in Myanmar, a country that was closed off to the world for 60 years, one of the key questions government officials asked me when I visited in January was: How can we engage the market, attract investment, and create jobs for our people?

But we've also learned that growth isn't enough. Economic growth accounts for about two-thirds of poverty reduction. The other third comes from redistributive policies, such as

progressive tax systems and conditional cash transfers that give money to the poor for sending their kids to school and going to the doctor.

In recent years, we've seen what happens when growth is not inclusive. In places as diverse as Egypt, Turkey, Thailand, and Chile, people have streamed into the streets to demand a greater share of their country's economic growth.

That leads to the second challenge: investing in people. Investing in people provides a major boost to economic growth and may also represent the best way to forge social inclusion and reduce inequality over time. Let me give you some of the numbers.

The Lancet Commission - a group headed by leading economists and public health experts - found that between the years 2000 and 2011, 24 percent of economic growth in low- and middle-income countries resulted from improvements in health.

The Commission also found that smart health investments would allow low-income countries to reduce their rates of infectious diseases and maternal and child mortality to the levels of the best performing middle-income countries by 2035. The human gains from this grand convergence in health outcomes would be enormous. The Commission estimated it would prevent roughly 4.5 million deaths in 2035 alone.

The link between education and economic growth is just as strong. A 2010 study by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development looked at the link between PISA scores - which track academic achievement across countries - and economic growth. The study found that even small improvements in countries' PISA scores can result in substantial long-term economic gains. In other words, when kids learn more, countries grow faster.

But even if countries do everything right on the growth front and invest in their people, it won't matter unless we sustain our planet for future generations.

This leads to the third global challenge: slowing the rising tide of climate change.

Climate change threatens our fragile existence on this planet. And because people living in extreme poverty are more vulnerable than anyone else, they will be the first to feel the brunt of the impact. Just consider what's at stake.

A four-degree Celsius increase in global temperatures would trigger unprecedented heat waves, severe drought, and major floods in many regions. The global sea level would rise

by up to one meter, and could be up to 20 percent higher in the tropics, where most of the world's poor live. Even a two-degree rise in global temperatures, which could happen as early as 2030, would result in devastating food shortages in Sub-Saharan Africa.

It is fundamentally unjust that those least responsible for raising the Earth's temperature will suffer the gravest consequences from climate change.

I've called for global leaders to focus on five urgent tasks: we must cut carbon emissions in cities; promote climate-smart agriculture; increase investment in renewable energy; set a predictable price for carbon; and end fossil fuel subsidies.

Some of these steps will prove politically challenging. Businesses don't want to pay more for energy, and people don't want fuel prices to rise. But now is the time for political leaders to show courage and do what it takes to keep our planet livable for future generations.

Now I know that Brown has had its own debate about how to take bold steps to fight climate change. I know, for instance, about the drive to divest all coal investments and I've read President Paxson's thoughtful response in deciding against doing that. I'm not here to make a judgement on this issue, but I must say that I am proud as an alumnus that students raised these difficult questions - and continue to raise them -- and that the community as a whole took them on.

Whether it's climate change or ending poverty, maybe you have your own ideas about what needs to be done in the world and how you'll go about changing it. You may disagree with me and you may challenge my ideas about what needs to be done. That's exactly the kind of bold thinking from young people that keeps this world moving forward. What I want you to remember is how you feel at this very moment in your lives: idealistic, driven, passionate, wanting to change the world. You not only need to hold onto that, you need to act. When Dr. King talked about bending the arc of history, he didn't mean that we should be spectators who stand back and watch history unfold. He showed us through his own life that all of us must do our part to grab the arc of history and bend it toward justice with everything we have.

That's not all. Dr. King also talked about the value of time. In Dr. King's Letter from a Birmingham Jail, he expressed frustration with a white moderate, a self-professed friend of the Civil Rights movement, who advised Dr. King to slow down in his push for racial justice. The white moderate argued that quote "All Christians know that the colored people will receive equal rights eventually, but it is possible that you are in too great a religious hurry. It

has taken Christianity almost two thousand years to accomplish what it has. The teachings of Christ take time to come to earth."

Dr. King responded and I quote: "Such an attitude stems from a tragic misconception of time, from the strangely irrational notion that there is something in the very flow of time that will inevitably cure all ills. Actually time itself is neutral. It can be used either destructively or constructively. More and more I feel that the people of ill will have used time more effectively than have the people of good will. We will have to repent in this generation, not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people, but for the appalling silence of the good people. Human progress never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability...We must use time creatively, in the knowledge that the time is always ripe to do right." End quote.

When I was your age, I had so many questions about my identity and my purpose. I'm now in the sixth decade of my life, and, today, I can assure you that the time is always ripe to do right. So find something that will give you clarity and purpose. Find your Dr. King. And then act with urgency and discipline to make a difference in this world. I was a student on this campus not so long ago - at least that's how I see it - and I had a tight circle of friends. Like many of you today, we asked many questions about ourselves, about justice, and about our place far outside the walls of Brown. Eventually, many of us came to that same fundamental question, "What is to be done in the world, and what will I do to change it?"

That's the question that I've tried to answer my entire life. I'm still trying. You should ask it of yourselves, too. What will you do? My great hope is that some of you answer it by working to end poverty, boost shared prosperity, and battle climate change. But whatever you do, please remember that the time is now for all of us to work together to bend the arc of history toward justice.

The great anthropologist Margaret Mead once said, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has."

Be those citizens. Take it on. And please go change the world.

Thank you very much.