THE NEW SCHOOL

2008 University Commencement Remarks from Michael Edwards

The Importance of Being Publicly Stupid

Congratulations to everyone who is graduating today and to their friends and families for getting them here. I want to talk to you briefly about how I managed to get here and what I learned by doing it.

Before I came to Parsons in the summer of 2007, I was competent. I had worked for eight years as a programmer, building websites and software and so forth. I had the answers for most questions, and I knew where to look when I didn't. I never had to look foolish in front of the people who would judge me. It was a very tidy setup. And it was very, very boring.

Once I joined the Design and Technology MFA program, that changed quickly. One of our first major assignments was to observe a public space and get people in that space to interact with an interface that we designed for the location. My team and I chose a small diner next to the commuter rail station in Jersey City (seemed like a good spot—it was warm, it had coffee and pancakes). We spent hour after hour, over weekends and very early in the morning, watching the commuters and elderly patrons go about their business. We took detailed ethnographic notes of their seating arrangements, the length of their stay, their activities—all carefully logged and analyzed. Then we designed a series of very clever little projects, quietly placed on the cafe tables, and waited for the interaction to begin. We waited for a whole month. In that time, only one person, out of many hundreds, even touched something we'd done. We pressed on, but nothing we did, nothing, even came close to engaging anyone.

We presented this failure to a panel of critics—it was our final project. We came clean. We showed what we did, the many different approaches we took, and admitted that not one person in the diner gave our stuff a second look. To our surprise, the critics roundly praised what we had done. They were impressed with our methodology and our willingness to stick to it. And I began to suspect that the point of the course was not to find solutions, but to get us acquainted with looking stupid. In public.

This past summer, I traveled to Malawi, a small country in southern Africa. My department sent me there as part of a fellowship to work with the Malawi Health Equity Network, a growing health-care advocacy group. I would be designing for a country I had never been to, for people I had never met, on a subject I knew nothing about, in the space of four weeks. Sure enough, once I arrived and realized what I had gotten myself into, I came to this conclusion—I am the dumbest man in the entire country.

There is a relief that comes with recognizing the depths of your own ignorance. I knew nothing, and therefore had everything to learn. And being openly dumb allowed other people to help me. It quickly came to the point that my friend, Paul Kawale, took pity on me and said, "I am going to show you Malawi." So he made sure I saw hospitals and clinics, cities and villages, youth groups and squatters' settlements, and disease and struggle and the inexhaustible and unflinching courage of many, many people. All in an attempt to make sure I left as a slightly less stupid person than the guy who showed up a month before.

I believe it worked. When you struggle to reconcile your beliefs about a place and a people with the situation on the ground, and you surrender to what is and not what you think there ought to be, that is the essence, I think, of producing good design. But it requires a humility so total, and so real, that only admitting you are ignorant will allow you to see reality and begin to solve the problem. Suddenly, the possibilities open up. My thesis work became one of the problems I found on the trip. And the experience has changed my view of how people live in one of the world's poorest countries, as well as my view of what we Americans try to do, and how we fail, when we think we already know everything.

It is to the university's great credit, the way it plunges us into demanding work with such talented people. Haven't we all been in classes, during our careers at The New School, surrounded by brilliant peers, when we felt like the only people who just weren't getting it? The trick, I think, is that we're all at least a little lost a lot of the time. It causes us to find each other as scholars and friends, when the supposed genius sitting to our right asks the same "stupid" question that's been nagging at us. None of us had, or will have, all the answers, but, as a community, we're curious and brave and open to change. And we have come through this by learning from everyone else around us.

So let's keep that going. Let's be ignorant *together*. It's an ignorance that is not a front or a pose, but a kind of intellectual honesty. From now on, let's take this essential lesson from our education here. Let's be open about how little we know. Because what little I do know, I learned from being frequently, openly, publicly, and unabashedly the dumbest person in the room. I hope you'll join me there.