

**Renu Malhotra
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On Excellence

I have been asked to speak on Excellence. This is a very broad subject, but here is my take on it: Excellence is a habit of mind.

Every day we are confronted with a myriad of tasks. A writing assignment or a lab report at school. At work - restoring a piece of delicate equipment, dealing with an unhappy customer. In our personal life we have many - what I call life maintenance chores - daily grooming, managing our money, taking out the trash. Any task that we must do, we can do it badly or we can do it moderately well or we can do it excellently. How we do the tasks is often dictated by our "habits". Whether we do that lab with a charged-up intellect or we take short-cuts such as letting a partner do it all. Whether we address a customer's complaint by going above and beyond expectations. Whether we show up in class in pajamas or make ourselves presentable.

The students here are here because they have the "habit of excellence" in their academic work. My guess is that, more often than not, you also have this habit in other spheres of your life. But specifically in Science, excellence means: being thorough in research, being rigorous, being creative and innovative, exercising imagination but also a healthy skepticism, and, always, always cultivating a habit of mind that makes for a fertile environment for discovery and invention.

I call excellence a habit because there is a parallel in nature. I am a casual bird-watcher. One bird that fascinates me is the hummingbird. This creature makes the most exquisite nests, The birds craft their nest slowly and carefully over many many days. Their nests are little architectural marvels - very sturdy, smartly built to protect their tiny eggs. Truly an example of excellence.

In contrast, I'll tell you a funny incident that happened earlier this year. In the Spring it was. One Saturday, my daughter and I had made a brief stop at home in-between some soccer games. We parked the car, went inside the house, and were back in less than ten minutes to drive away again. But as I was getting in the car I noticed something near the bottom of the windshield. It turned out that the few minutes we were in the house were enough for a mourning dove to quickly place three pine needles, passing them off as a nest, and then lay an egg there! A warm warm egg! Wow - quite the opposite of the habits of the hummingbird! We marvelled and chuckled about the sloppy dove.

By the way, although we removed that nest-egg and placed it carefully in a carton in the carport, the egg did not survive - we found the empty shell the next day, obviously the victim of some predator.

So, Why is the habit of excellence important?

The answer, upon reflection, is obvious and short: Choosing excellence makes a difference. It makes a difference because a job done well causes your work to be remembered well. It causes **you** to be remembered well. Excellent work has surprising longevity, even permanence. And it has the immeasurable effect of increasing joy and beauty in the world - I have nothing against doves, but I find hummingbirds infinitely more worthy of my leisure time!

Cultivating and exercising the habit of excellence will stand you in good stead well beyond your university years.

Congratulations on all the honors you have earned!