"I shall talk today about encounters. Encounters. When two people meet. Or two particles. Or two cultures. In that crucial moment of interaction the results of an encounter are determined. In the simplest of encounters -- say, with two billiard balls -- the outcome is a predictable result of position, velocity and mass. But the encounters that interest me most are not so simple. In the encounters of people and cultures, much depends on the path that each has taken to that point. These are not stochastic processes. The subjects have histories. The encounter has complexity and rich dimensionality. The result of an encounter between two people or between two cultures is shaped by the assumptions of each, by their respective goals and -- perhaps most directly relevant to a university -- by the repertoire of responses that each has learned. Encounters therefore have aspects of both the general and the specific. What makes our current time distinctive are the new combinations of people and cultures that are participating in these encounters....

"Let me take one example to illustrate the challenging encounters to which today’s graduates might apply their intelligence. Tajikistan is a mountainous country in Central Asia of 5 million people, more than 90% Muslim. As a republic in the former Soviet Union bordering China and Afghanistan, it had a strategic importance that dwarfed its natural resources. The Soviet Union therefore invested heavily in Tajikistan, building roads and power stations, supplementing food supplies and equipment, developing the educational and health systems. The result was a highly educated, sophisticated but largely rural population that managed its affairs well at home -- by the rules of the game at that time -- and provided well-developed human resources for export to other parts of the Soviet Union. With the fall of the Soviet Union, things changed for Tajikistan. Subsidies, which had provided most of the Republic’s budget and, for the remoter parts, 80% of the food supply, were cut off. The result has been hunger, shortages of fuel and clothing and deep
uncertainty about the future. Long suppressed ethnic tensions -- between indigenous 
Tajiks, neighbouring Uzbeks and Kirghiz and immigrant Russians, among others -- became 
more evident as groups jostled for political and economic control. Religion emerged from 
private houses, where it had been practised covertly for 60 years, to become a manifest 
force.

"Tajikistan has become the focus of one of the most interesting encounters of the day. It is 
here, and in the other Central Asian Republics, that three great cultures encounter one 
another: the ex-Communist world, the Muslim world, and the Western world. It is here that 
those three cultures could forge a success that would contrast starkly with the brutal failure 
in Bosnia. The result of the encounter in Tajikistan may determine much about the way 
history unfolds over the coming decades, so it is worth thinking a bit about the stance that 
each of these cultures might take in preparing for this encounter. That thought might lead 
one to ask what it would take for this, or any, encounter to be constructive. I suggest that 
there are four pre-requisites for success. For each of the cultures, the result should, first, 
draw on its strengths and, second, be consistent with its goals. Third, the result should be a 
sustainable improvement in the current situation. And fourth, the transition should be 
humane.

"Each of these three cultures has something to bring to the solution of the problems of 
Tajikistan. The West has many strengths, but prominent among them are science and 
democracy (with their public mechanisms for self-correction) and also private institutions, 
liberal economics, and a recognition of fundamental human rights. The Muslim world 
offers deep roots in a system of values, emphasising service, charity and a sense of common 
responsibility, and denying what it sees to be the false dichotomy between religious and 
secular lives. The ex-Communist world, although it failed economically, made important 
investments in social welfare, with particular emphasis on the status of women, and was 
able to achieve in Tajikistan impressive social cohesion. These are a powerful array of 
strengths and goals. Just how to combine them to solve Tajikistan’s problems is not clear. 
But if the outcome is to be sustainable, it seems necessary to concentrate resources on the 
development of private institutions, of accountable public institutions, and of human 
potential."

His Highness the Aga Khan’s 1994 Massachusetts Institute of Technology Commencement 
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