

# SUZANNE TURNER'S 2014 SPRING COMMENCEMENT ADDRESS

May 16, 2014



I am honored to be here today. It's great to see colleagues, and I am excited about our college's continued great work.

First, congratulations to the parents and spouses—you had the courage to let your child or partner follow his or her passion. And to the students—you had the insight to know what you love to do and the guts to choose your passion rather than a paycheck. You know that the life of an artist or designer is a life filled with risk-taking and more unknowns than knowns, but on the other hand, the life brings with it the chance to imagine our culture's future and to participate in what that future will be. You have made this choice because you believe that your work can make people's experience of life deeper and more meaningful.

You are so fortunate. There's never been a time like now for the artist and designer. Our society has finally embraced the arts and design (just think Apple) and has begun to depend upon them as an integral part of civic life. *The world is indeed your oyster.* And whether or not you find a pearl, and what kind of pearl you discover, is completely up to you.

In my brief time this morning, I want to talk about the journey that you will take as you enter your professional life, looking for your place in this complex web of modern culture. The choices are daunting. No longer is one simply a sculptor, or a printmaker, or a landscape architect, or an architect, or an interior designer. Today, collaboration defines practice, with blurred lines between our traditional territories. And so it may take a while for you to discover the right blending of the fields in which you have the most talent and contributions to make.

I believe that the time of the hero-architect, the individual artist, the star-designer, is behind us. The most exciting work being produced today is the result of collaborations among people with sympathetic world views and shared ethics.

So finding your way will be a *journey*, a journey characterized by inspirations, missteps, important mentors, communities of friends, synchronicity, and surprises.

Now I could pontificate about how to streamline your search and how to avoid the missteps along the way—but I won't. You don't

want the search to end or even accelerate—the search is the prize you get for choosing this life. And you have to make mistakes; you already know that the missteps often lead to the inspirations that matter most.

The experience that I have to share with you today, as you launch, is my own. As I have looked back, I have tried to understand what the thread was that wove the events of my life together. And what I find is that one of those threads *is that* I unknowingly or subconsciously insisted on letting my *intuition* set my path rather than making great plans.

Daniel Burnham, architect and urban designer, said, “Make no little plans—they have no magic to stir men’s blood.” Well I sometimes made NO plans, and instead, waited for the path to unfold. That’s how I selected a college, how I decided on my major of art history, how I chose a graduate school, and how I finally entered landscape architecture. It was intuition—and important mentors—who guided me along the way, often without my realizing that I was being guided.

Several of those mentors were my professors, so remember the faculty who’ve worked with you here. They don’t stop caring about your future just because you’ve left LSU. And their wisdom just grows as they age. One of the true joys of my career has been the opportunity to collaborate with several of my former students on projects that I could never have completed on my own.

My time in college had a profound impact on where I eventually landed and what I have done for life. In 1970, students protesting the Vietnam War at Kent State University in Ohio were shot by the National Guard. This event created a tumultuous response on hundreds of campuses, including my own Emory University in Atlanta. But rather than violent protesting, Emory invited a theater troupe, the Bread and Puppet Theater, to help the university community deal with this profoundly disturbing event. The young actors and puppeteers came to campus and led performances that channeled the grief, tension, and energies of angry students who were opposed to the war.

These days of students and faculty meeting together, parading together, singing together, and praying together have always stayed



with me. For the first time, I experienced the power of the arts to *create* community and to make that community work in a positive way.

When it came time to make a decision about what to do after college, my mentor for life, an art history professor, made two suggestions.



His suggestions shifted my perspective in a way that was permanent.

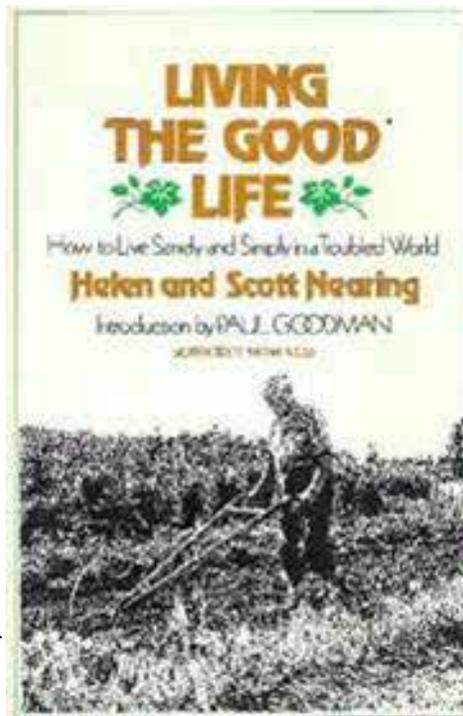
First, he gave me a book, *Living the Good Life*, written in 1954 by a couple who had left their jobs, he a college professor and she a musician, to live off the land in 1932. They grew as much of their food as possible, became vegetarians, and supported themselves by making maple sugar from the trees on their farm.

The Nearings were devoted to a lifestyle that

valued work, on the one hand, and contemplation or play, on the other. They divided a day's waking hours into three blocks of four hours: "bread labor" (work directed toward meeting requirements of food, shelter, clothing); civic work (doing something for their community); and professional pursuits or recreation (practicing a musical instrument, reading).

It would take many years before I realized how influential that book would be for my life's course.

The second piece of advice my mentor gave me was that I might try studying landscape architecture. His wife had recently entered the program at the nearby University of Georgia in Athens and loved it. He



thought I was suited for it as well. And so I enrolled in the landscape architecture program and found that he knew me pretty well. I tapped into a part of myself that had never really been explored. I had found a discipline that was so broad that I could pursue visual thinking and design and analysis at any scale, from a regional plan to the design of a residential garden.

But most importantly, three years later, after I'd completed my coursework, I returned to Louisiana, something I'd vowed I'd never do. After living in Georgia for eight years, with a summer in Boston and another summer in Cortona, Italy, I'd seen the wide world and liked it. I especially liked living in cities where you could walk to everything and could buy fresh produce in a public outdoor market. In



my mind, Louisiana didn't match up.

But I still hadn't finished my thesis (you've probably heard that procrastination is an important stage in the creative process—it's just called incubation). So I went home for a temporary teaching job at LSU while I lived with my parents. My nine-month sojourn in Louisiana was just going to be a means to an end and a way to get some experience on my resume. The prospect of living rent-free in my childhood home, with meals and laundry taken care of and the quiet to do my research and writing, seemed ideal.

And it was ideal in so many ways. I finished my thesis. Living with my parents and finally being the only child in the house—I am the oldest of five—was a treat. I got to know them as real people and that relationship has meant so much to me.

Something else happened, very slowly and subtly, but a powerful experience nonetheless. I began to experience the landscape of south Louisiana as a very different place than I remembered. I took my classes on field trips to rural parts of Louisiana. We visited historic places, sugar cane mills and the vast agricultural landscapes and residential villages that surrounded them. We drove the River Road with its patchwork



of sugar cane fields, plantation houses, and petrochemical plants side by side. These landscapes were layered with several hundreds of years of use, often by the same families. I became curious about the history of these rural landscapes, went to the library (no Google then), and discovered that very little had been written about this place that was beginning to seem incredibly beautiful and complex to me. I also realized that these rural landscapes were at risk in so many ways, mostly because they weren't recognized as valuable anymore.





To make a long story short, I decided to stay. I'd also discovered that I loved teaching and that academic life offered things that were important to me, including the flexibility of a schedule that allowed me to travel. And travel I did. I studied in England one summer; then fed my passion for architecture by visiting the works of Alvar Aalto, Le Corbusier—finally getting to see Ronchamps, perhaps the most mysterious and spiritual building in the world—and Antonio Gaudi's body of magical work. And the amazing Max Conrad took a group of faculty and students to Japan, Bali, Singapore, and Bangkok.



I moved out of my parents' house and into an old house on the block where my maternal grandmother had lived. A widow, she'd moved to Baton Rouge from Missouri so my dad could attend LSU on a band scholarship. She ran a boarding house for single men who worked at the Esso refinery. As a child, I'd spent many weekends visiting my grandmother and walking to the corner store for groceries.

When my grandmother passed away, my dad kept the house, hoping that eventually the neighborhood would have a renaissance. He began to acquire adjacent homes as their elderly owners passed away, planning to tear these ordinary houses down to build a high-rise office tower. Little did he know that his daughter, the landscape architect, and his wife, the preservationist, had other plans.

Long story short, my family, my husband, and I rehabilitated the houses and developed a small community with common gardens and

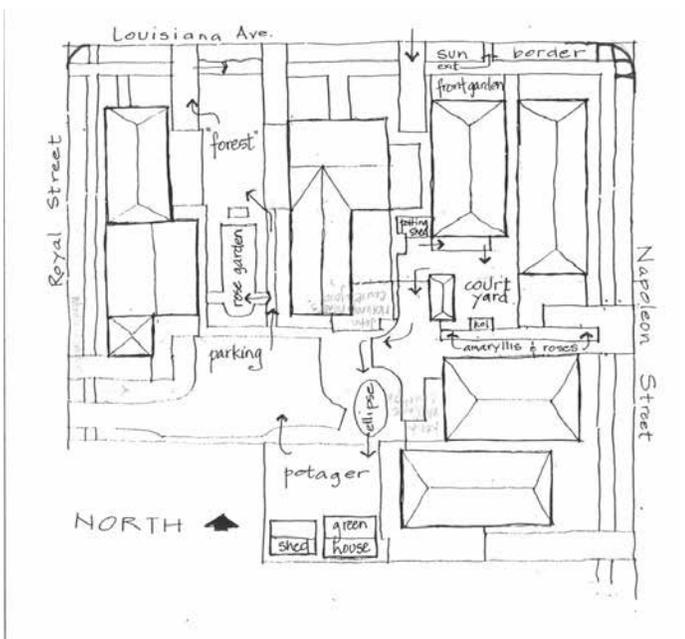




parking and the hope that neighbors would know each other and participate in civic and social life together. And slowly, the plan worked. And because I didn't cook and we had a young daughter who liked to eat, neighbors cooked for us, and we shared meals. My husband has a great wine cellar, so we were always welcome. But one thing was missing. This was before Whole Foods and way before Trader Joe's, and there was very little locally produced food available to cook the way we wanted to eat—healthy, fresh, and sustainably.

And then 17 years ago, a grad student in my urban design class asked if I'd help him start a farmers' market for Baton Rouge. I couldn't wait. He knew how to find the farmers, and I could find the community volunteers to help. Red Stick Farmers' Market was born and has prospered because we were clearly not the only ones craving an alternative food supply.

I am so convinced that planning neighborhoods—where people actually connect—promotes happy and productive lives that we are developing another nearby block, designed around the idea of growing food, cooking, and eating together. A central greenhouse and a





community garden, kitchen, and dining room organize the plan that combines old and new residences. The greenhouse is built, this year's garden is planted, and we're ready to build the houses.

My message to you today is that wherever you find yourself in the next stage of your life, you must immerse yourself in that place as



if it were the most important place in the world, and you must come to know it, so that you can change it for the better. All that has gone before you—your mentors, your travel, and most of all, your confidence in your gift of intuition—is a part of how you will see the place and what you decide to do there. Use it. Use it to build your community. Use it to create your work. And remember that the community of the College of Art & Design is here and wants to know about your journey as you make your way.

Again, congratulations and safe travels!



**“We are all in the same boat in a stormy sea . . .”**

**—G. K. Chesterton**

