

Alumni Annual Event 2019

Casino L'Aliança del Poblenou, Barcelona Colegio Oficial de Arquitectos de Madrid

President of Alumni,
friends,

History studies tell us about the most notable facts from the past, with hindsight providing a thread and a degree of cause and effect which the people involved were doubtless unaware of.

This desire to make history rational and understandable is manifested in people's obsession with dates: 14 July 1789, the French Revolution; 18 July 1936, the Spanish Civil War; 1 January 1986, Spain's accession to the European Union, ad infinitum.

But in actual fact – let's hope no historians are listening – these things didn't just happen on those days.

Of course, the dates are relevant, but they belong to much more extensive processes; it is not until many years later that we attach this special significance to one particular day, giving it an exaggerated sense of importance, but undeniably adding symbolism in our efforts to remember the past.

We all like to pinpoint decisive moments in our lives, although in truth our decisions are often not really that impulsive or as dramatic as we might like to imagine.

As president of the UOC, I could easily be tempted to attribute some kind of epiphanous significance to the dates on which Carla, Daphné, Roger, Eduard, Sílvia, Pedro, Marit Elisabeth, Ricardo and César enrolled.

But I'd be wrong to do that. As they themselves have told us, above all the UOC was significant in its guidance and support that helped them realize their potential.

«Because just as important as having an idea, is having an environment in which it is possible and the will to make it happen.»

Our alumni here today bring to mind that maxim of Judy Garland, the great actress and singer who died almost exactly fifty years ago. She would say «Always be a first-rate version of yourself, instead of a second-rate version of somebody else.»

Because regardless of their different starting points and goals, all five of them are driven by the same desire for change and transformation, the same ambition to work and be better professionals, which is the way to go about creating a better future.

However, these aspirations do not come upon us all of a sudden, for example in our dreams or in the shower, rather they are the result of the conscious or subconscious processes by which we grow more mature, focused and complete.

We may know the date it culminates, but not for how long the idea has been budding inside us or waiting to make its mark on society.

Any idea is in fact an innovation, a positive development, an addition to the sum of our knowledge.

This includes the need to think outside the box. Recent advances in exponential technologies, for example big data and artificial intelligence, have armed us with enormous potential.

And this potential can have both positive and negative effects. Arguments about whether technology is for better or for worse are as old as invention itself, be it in Silicon Valley or back in the Bronze Age.



«As is often said, the crux of the matter is not the technology, but rather what it is used for, and that chiefly depends on us. It depends on our desire to incorporate reflection and self-criticism in the way we handle it, and it depends on our ability to ally it with human and humanistic values.»

This was commented by Brad Smith, President and Chief Legal Officer, and Harry Shum, Executive Vice President of Microsoft AI and Research Group, in the recent book, *The Future Computed: Artificial Intelligence and its role in society*, in reference to a key advance in the fourth industrial revolution: «As computers behave more like humans, the social sciences and humanities will become even more important. [...]. If AI is to reach its potential in serving humans, then every engineer will need to learn more about the liberal arts and every liberal arts major will need to learn more about engineering.»

As such, we should not give much credence to the notion that solutions will come to us in a magical moment of inspiration. Instead we must understand that knowledge and understanding – like history – is a process.

There aren't magical dates, or epiphanies; rather there is work, learning, inspiration and collaboration.

«We need to get away from determinism and pessimism; we need to demolish the ridiculous barriers separating disciplines; and we need to abolish exclusivism and hierarchies...»

We need all of this and a whole lot more. But the key thing that makes a difference lies within ourselves as a species, as human beings.

The late Stephen Hawking wrote that only empathy can save humanity. That's right, empathy: the ability to put yourself in someone else's place, whether you know them or not, whether they belong to your peers or to future generations.

Think again about the nine experiences we've just heard about; the key thing they have in common is empathy.



«If we had to say which is the best or preferred way to create knowledge, it would have to be with people supporting each other, with collaboration and empathy.»

At the UOC we have been working on making this possible for 25 years. And despite the significant headway and achievements we've made, the main thing we're thinking about is what is still to be done.

I started by talking about history, but at the UOC we're equally focused on the future.

All of you alumni here today, represented by the nine of you who have spoken, are proof that we are on the right track, and you motivate us to keep going.

Thank you very much.

Josep A. Planell