Much has changed since I was an undergraduate and then MPA student in the 1970’s—laptops instead of key punch cards and manual typewriters; texting and Twitter instead of snail mail; and a flat world and global economy instead of “Made in America.”

However, much is the same: the threat of nuclear power in the wrong hands; frightening recessions where young people worry they will never be able to own a home or find a decent job and older people worry that they will outlive their savings; and a country struggling to define the role of government after years of an unpopular war and actions by public leaders that have destroyed much of its faith in government. So, maybe a few of the lessons I have learned over the past 30 years will be relevant for you as you are saying goodbye to this special program in this very special place.

I have experienced many cycles of ups and downs—economically, professionally, and personally. During this time, my view of the world and of government in particular, has matured. I remember, as an MPA student, feeling moral superiority to my friends who were in Business School, Law School or even Medical School. They were preparing to chase the money, while I was preparing to sacrifice personal wealth for public service and the betterment of society.

I can’t recall having significant epiphanies or moments of enlightenment that transformed my thinking about government and my ability or inability to save the world. Rather, life simply softened, mellowed, and ripened my views. Thankfully, the rose-colored glasses were not ripped from my eyes by any one stark event. Instead, the color gradually faded; expectations of myself, others and government became less opaque, but always with just enough hint of rose to see the possibilities and stave off cynicism.

There are three simple lessons I would like to share with you today:

LESSON ONE: It is good to want to make the world a better place and help society; a little idealism can prompt you to accomplish things others would not dare to attempt. It is not good, however, to feel that your work, your motives or your actions are nobler than those of people who work in the for-profit world.

I remember Doug’s and my disdain for a neighbor who lived next door to our first apartment when he tried to convince us to become Amway distributors—he attempted to lure is in by bragging about all the money he had earned selling soap on the side. We, in a highly pious tone, informed him that we were not interested in his capitalistic Ponzi scheme—we were public servants. Over time, I came to realize that Amway had sparked an entrepreneurial spirit in many people—helped them to be their own bosses and build business; helped stay-at-home moms develop work skills and contribute much-needed family income. Amway was not an evil scheme that preyed on greed.

As Doug said, the private sector creates the growth and wealth of nations that allow people to have good jobs, higher standards of living and opportunities for themselves and their children. Government’s role is to provide services that benefit the common good—hopefully doing so in a way that does not destroy
growth, even while overseeing how that growth occurs by recognizing the importance of not only what we accomplish, but the actions that get us there.

Negative views of both government and private industry have resulted when greed and a lust for power led to destructive and disastrous decisions and actions. Neither the public nor private sector is qualified to point a finger at the other—both have made mistakes and suffered from scandal, incompetence and ineffective leaders. However, I still believe that the majority of people in both sectors are honest, honorable and hard-working.

LESSON TWO: Always remember the mission and purpose of the government program or policy—the problem it is trying to help solve.

I remember the fear I felt when Ronald Regan was elected in 1980—he was anti-government and I knew my world would never be the same. Looking back, I still do not agree with all of President Regan’s decisions, but he was right that many government programs had not worked as well as they should have, and many people had lost sight of why the programs were created in the first place. Rather, the perpetuation of the program, of the bureaucracy, had become their primary mission.

Public debates on what is good policy and which programs are the most effective are healthy. We benefit from varying points of view and perspectives. We need to try new approaches and ways to solve problems—especially deep-seated problems such as poverty, affordable health care, and our role in global conflicts and war. What I challenge each of you to do is fight against the pull to become wed to any particular answer, program or policy. Never stop questioning whether the current way is working; how it can be improved; or, whether it should be scrapped altogether in favor of another approach.

Always keep your sight on the underlying purpose and be ready to change course when the times and the circumstances warrant change.

LESSON THREE: Live your life, personally and professionally, in a manner that reflects well on yourself and your profession. Having survived 25 years in the public fish bowl, I have seen too many careers, and even lives, shattered by bad personal choices. For some, the temptation of improper personal benefits, such as gifts from vendors or contractors, was too great. Others enjoyed or even abused wielding power, and some became overly enthralled with the public and media attention. Always remember that an action does not have to be illegal to be improper or destroy your reputation. And, your power and notoriety come from your position; they are temporary, whether you are a program administrator in a small town or the President of the United States.

Finally, my hope for you is that you enjoy your career in public service as much as I have enjoyed mine. I am proud of my own accomplishments, proud to have been part of this fine program and this great school, and proud of what I am sure each of you will accomplish as you begin or resume your careers.

I would like to end with the one of my favorite passages from "The Prophet" by Khalil Gibran.

> And what is it to work with love?
> It is to weave the cloth with threads drawn from your heart, even as if your beloved were to wear that cloth.
> It is to build a house with affection, even as if your beloved were to dwell in that house.
> It is so sow seeds with tenderness and reap the harvest with joy, even as if your beloved were to eat the fruit.
It is to charge all things you fashion with a breath of your own spirit….  
Work is love made visible.

Congratulations, and I look forward to hearing about all of your many accomplishments in the years ahead.

Sharon Rothwell is Vice President of Corporate Affairs for Masco Corporation. Headquartered in Taylor, Michigan, Masco Corporation is one of the world’s leading manufacturers of home improvement and building products. In her role as Vice President, she represents Masco in its community and charitable activities and in government relations and civic activities. Prior to joining Masco in 2003, she served as Chief of Staff to Michigan Governor John Engler; as director of labor relations for the state of Michigan; and as state personnel director for the state of Delaware. Sharon and Doug Rothwell met when they entered the UNC MPA program in 1978.