Good evening everyone and thank you, Illa for that introduction – and to Illa and Mimi for founding this inspiring initiative. Thank you to all ’76 classmates for your enthusiasm and commitment to what we are doing here. I’m honored and delighted to be here today and to be a part of this series of discussions, particularly after listening to being here for Alumni Day and hearing from many fellow Princetonians - recognizing that in our class in particular there are many whose contributions in a wide variety of endeavors are enormous and varied – so I am humbled to be the one speaking to you about what has been a rather “nontraditional” career. I’d also like to congratulate the business plan competitors. Most of all, I’d like to thank all of you for being here!

When my classmates first asked me to be a part of this Spirit of Service Environmental Initiative program I wasn’t entirely sure where to start (and as I just mentioned, at this Alumni Day I have been both inspired and humbled – as well as awed by and proud of what many others have accomplished. The overall thrust of our class activities today is the environment and how people can make a difference both in protecting and restoring it, and I’ve been asked to talk about how the arc of my life has developed in that context. I do admit to traveling under some false pretenses on that last point since I’ve never thought of myself as an environmental activist per se – and I’m never really sure actually, whether I’m a pragmatist or an idealist.

In fact, my path has been guided more by an interest in people – specifically in people as they form communities –and in helping them to realize their own dreams. I use “energy”, and specifically what I call “local or community energy” to enable that effort rather than as an end in itself. I’d like to start, though, with a focus on the choices people make in their personal and professional lives, because those choices are at once guided by a concern for and then have an impact on the environment. Current political rhetoric to the contrary, I don’t think there is one single right choice -- or series of choices--nor do I think there is a “right” path to follow. Each of you will
choose – or has chosen – paths which are different from mine. In fact I would guess that many of my classmates would admit with me to having pursued several paths through our lives so far!!

In any case, my own path has been neither straight nor singular, and I’d like to share some parts of it with you so that we can talk more broadly about the possibilities of a life of service – in the spirit of ’76. 5 I do recognize, and we should all bear in mind, that circumstances today are very different from what they were in 1976. The imperatives of energy waste, cost, and uneven resource distribution and use remain, of course, but these are in many ways overshadowed by concerns about water, global climate change, and environmental degradation resulting from a whole host of factors. The framework within which all of us are making decisions today is therefore a different one. In fact however, that doesn’t matter for what I want to talk about this evening – the specifics are less important than the way one’s path unfolds.

There are people who know at an early age what draws them, what their life work will be. I am not one of them. Yet when I look back I do find patterns, 6 and understand that even if there is no real “path”, what I do today does derive from a larger picture composed of many different pieces. At times I wish I’d been smart enough to see that picture earlier, but at least it’s nice now to recognize that there is one, and to know that my task is to deepen and strengthen it! I suppose my circuitous route began when I was a child. It was not my choice to leave Detroit for Australia with my family when I was 6 or moved to Germany a few years later – but if it had been, I would only have chosen more quickly! Without my even being aware of it, that began my fascination with and enjoyment of all things international and intercultural, as well as my conviction that everything is connected – and both remain at the center of my picture. Coloring that picture is a strong sense that I am part of something vast and varied and wonderfully connected.

At Princeton I decided to major in Anthropology to add an element of rigor to what was really more of an intuition, trying to understand how things work for people, and peoples, wherever they are. 7 As my classmates will remember, the mid-70’s were a time when businesses were beginning to think about what we now call social and environmental responsibility; those were the early years of “Earth Day”, of community responsibility and cross-cultural training, discussions about the “third world” and efforts at defining “sustainability”. Recognizing that power and resources are differentially distributed but that businesses can be agents for change and having been
interested in business all my life, I decided to head in that direction, and went to work for General Motors (possibly not my best decision ever!)

8 Working in corporations here and overseas taught me a great deal, but was also frustrating because I learned that I needed to believe in the goals of the institution I was working for, and so I moved to the nonprofit side and then pursued a graduate degree in international and intercultural management. You may not be surprised to learn that it soon became clear to me that many nongovernmental organizations, here and abroad, could use a strong dose of the rigor that is more commonly found in business organizations so I went back to school, getting an MBA from the University of Chicago with a focus on international business. Not exactly a straight or well-planned path – or even a clear picture!

Casting about for things to do with that eclectic, perhaps even confused, background I came back to the idea that if any organizations were in a position to effect positive change they were probably businesses – small, private business. 9 Government and nonprofits are critical and they do good work, but economic organizations are peculiarly important in our society so I decided finding ways to get those organizations to think about “doing well by doing good” should be my strategy. That was the genesis of Current-C Energy Systems, Inc. - the company that I started as a part of a complex of family businesses ranging from ecotourism to real estate.

You will not be surprised to know that things haven’t gone as smoothly or as logically as I hoped and thought they might! 10 In fact, my standard answer to the question of “Why did you start Current-C?” tends to be “because I was too dumb to know any better…” And, as anyone who has done the same thing can attest, there is a strong element of truth in that statement!! Nevertheless, it’s been intriguing and sometimes exciting. The business has adapted, changed focus, grown, contracted. At one time we had 12 people and operated mainly in the mountain west with large and mid-sized clients who wanted to become more energy efficient.

More recently, we’ve focused on what we call “strategic energy decisions and plans”, 11 with two core people and several “associates”. Our clients range from very small groups such as a consortium of water distribution coops in a very traditional and rural part of New Mexico, to international project work such as a capacity building program for the Ministry of Energy and Water in Afghanistan under USAID auspices. What our clients share is the understanding that
they can better achieve their goals if they use (or produce) energy wisely, and that we can help them do that while in the process improving their organization.

As you will have gathered, Current-C does not provide a “cookie cutter” approach. Sometimes I wish we did – that we could do one report with recommendations for a district school, and then change 10% of that report for the next school in the same district. In fact, when I first started in this business, that was my goal – and if we could have done it, we sure would have been a great deal more financially successful!! But – darn it all – even if the buildings are the same, the people living or working in them are not, nor is the environment which surrounds them. And back come those anthropology studies, leading me to look for “deep structure” but understanding that, on the outside, everything is going to have to look different – including our recommendations. SAD!

This is even more true with traditional populations, rural communities, and international projects.

Perhaps a few stories, or examples, might clarify things a bit.

In Wyoming, I was asked to make a presentation to the town council in the town of Wright about energy efficiency. Now, on the assumption that none of you here are from Wright, let me explain that it is a little company town smack dab in the middle of nowhere, on what were once the slightly rolling prairie grasslands. Wright is a company town, with several blocks of streets laid out in rectangles, a variety of manufactured and mobile homes, a school, and one large “center” which houses almost all the retail, commercial, and entertainment facilities. The population is under 1,500, and the major employer is the Thunder Basin Coal Mine, the largest open pit coal mine in the world. During my presentation, I toned down my “green” credentials, spoke about the importance of saving money through efficient energy use, avoided focusing on my usual suggestion that an energy assessment was an important path to community development… After several general questions, one Council member – who looked as though he drove one of those enormous mining trucks – set his cowboy hat more firmly on his head and interrupted. “What I want to know”, he said, “is why are we just looking at our energy use? That’s just a part of the problem. We’re a small town – let’s generate our own power, build our community, recycle all our wastes, conserve our water….Can you help us move towards being a sustainable community?” (To which of course the only appropriate answer was, DUH)
There was another even smaller town, population under 400, whose major employer – the sawmill – had been shut down by the EPA because the “teepee burner” it used to dispose of scrap did not meet air quality standards. That was indeed rather an understatement, but the EPA had been lenient because they did not want to cause economic hardship locally.

We recommended turning the “scrap” they were burning into products to sell, clearing the pine-bark beetle damaged timber from the forests, increasing employment and opportunities for local small businesses, building the community. They could carve the wood scraps, turn them into mulch, make kitty litter or pellets for wood stoves, build furniture, and numerous other possibilities. The “waste” would become “revenue”, and the sawmill would flourish along with the community.

In Afghanistan, a country with which I understand many of you are familiar through some of your coursework and PEI activities, we were asked in 2007 to provide energy efficiency and renewable energy recommendations for 16 Institutes of Higher Education throughout the country. With USAID funding, teachers were being trained and mentored at each of those institutions – in sometimes less-than-desirable facilities and conditions. The original idea was that power would soon arrive via the reconstructed national grid, which would have meant that energy efficiency would have been important, but we discovered early on that was unlikely.

Diesel generators were then – and are still in most places outside Kabul – the main power source, but many of the institutions either could not afford the diesel or could not get any during part of the year. It was most definitely a problem – but the potential solution brought with it the most interesting part of the project: Our recommendation was, “Bring back what you used to do – and then when you can buy solar panels or wind turbines, or connect to the grid, add those too.”

I know none of you could have helped but smile at the enthusiasm of the locals, the elders, as they described communal systems of under-floor heating, desert plants formed in a mat which, wetted down, was placed over an opening near the ground to cool the air coming in to a building, vents dug to different levels in the well hole near a house to help keep the house temperature constant, construction using adobe bricks and built into the ground or the side of a hill… Can you imagine how that felt? We were asking them what they would have done, and we were endlessly impressed. We put all of that in the report, and they were the experts!
Well – I have a confession to make here, actually. This was not a new idea for us; we had used that same technique when we did an energy use analysis for one of the pueblos in New Mexico. The puebloan peoples today are the descendants of those who used to be called the Anasazi, the cliff-house builders of the southwest. Today, the inhabited pueblos are reservations and therefore essentially countries within the US, and many of them are concentrated in New Mexico.

People have lived for hundreds of years in the central core or plaza areas where the older construction is of hand-formed adobe, but the “newer” homes provided by the government are built to standard codes. As part of the assessment, we compared one “traditional” home and another “government” home, taking extensive readings on both. And yes – we ended up recommending, strongly, that they go back to the way things had been done in the past.

You know, some of these stories do not have a happy ending – the project is not built, the implementing group falls apart, the funding disappears…. But the last one does: Right now, those buildings in Ohkay Owingeh plaza are being rebuilt, in the traditional way, as it happens by another client. The young woman who founded and runs the company doing the reconstruction comes from a neighboring pueblo, and was deeply honored that her company was chosen for this culturally and architecturally important project. She tells me she always liked playing in the mud – and that building homes the old way is precisely what she has always wanted to do!!

Ohkay Owingeh pueblo is important to me in another way, too. The name means “place of the strong people”, and is the birthplace of Pope, the first leader of a successful revolt in the Americas against a colonial power – his revolt threw the Spaniards out of New Mexico for 12 years. It is also the birthplace – I discovered during our project -- of my favorite anthropology professor when I was at Princeton, the late Alfonso Ortiz. That makes me wonder – if my professional path was not a straight one, might it be a circle – with additional connections yet to be discovered? How will THOSE fit in to my picture?

Let’s try to bring these stories into greater focus, and think about one particular situation – in rather the same manner that the student teams did with their business proposals, actually. Let’s consider northern Thailand, an area where there are old cities and beautiful temples, refugee camps along the Burmese border, high mountains, strongly flowing rivers, few
roads, and numbers of traditional communities with no access to power. If we were asked to “help” a particular community, this might be how we would start: 

1. Research the local area, the environment, the politics – anything we could think of
2. Meet with the leaders and community members, get to know them
3. Focus on what they HAVE, and their strengths
4. Determine what they need, and what they want
5. Carefully survey the community
6. Develop recommendations in concert with the community
7. Develop an implementation plan with the community at its’ center
8. Build the capacity of the community to do this again for themselves or others

For us, that is what local or community energy is, where in a village or a business, or another organization. If you are interested, then as one part of our discussion later, we might want to think about what questions should be answered in this process, and what concerns would need to be addressed.

All of these pieces form my picture, and as you can see I’m still putting them all together. But whatever the picture will turn out to have been, operating a small business of my own has allowed me a couple of luxuries that working in a larger enterprise would not. I can set my own pace and I can work across a large number of professional areas. I am not constrained by the increasing emphasis on “specialties”, which is a good thing since (evidently) I have never been able to stick to one thing in any case. I get to pick and choose the groups I work with to a large extent, following my Dad’s maxim that life is too short to work with people you don’t enjoy and admire. For instance, I’ve done some consulting work lately for a “nascent” company which combines a savonius wind turbine design with solar panels for use particularly in urban areas, and a company designing a sustainable prefabricated living / working module. When my children were young, I was able to care for them much of the time, while working close to full-time even if at odd hours (using another skill I learned at Princeton, the ability to do without sleep for days at a time).

There are less attractive things about the path I’ve taken, of course, and I don’t want to pretend that everything is golden. It is sometimes lonely being on one’s own
because the lasting relationships formed by a career spent in larger organizations or places are absent; you become a temporary part of a community and then move on. One quandary I have not yet solved is that, working with small groups or underserved communities means that there is very often a lot of pressure to do things for free. Some of the time that’s satisfying and fun and possible. But other times, the people asking for free help are people who work full-time in government and business organizations and don’t seem to understand that your work pays for your dinner because you don’t have another “job”. The constant search for new opportunities, and new paying gigs, means that sometimes there is a thin financial margin on which to operate, and it’s tough to actually DO projects at the same time. And, most frustrating of all, one sometimes works really hard to develop a plan that would help an organization or a community achieve a dream, and about which everyone is excited because it really CAN make a difference, only to see it shelved when one leaves.

I do find that what I am most passionate about is the chance to connect people across what sometimes seem boundaries of class and location and language, profession and purpose, finding essential human commonalities and working with a team to build from what people and communities have, from what they are. If we can move the discussion from “We need a new air conditioning and heating system” to “How can we achieve our mission by working together to make this building perform better, reduce costs, and increase revenue, using what we already have?” then we’ve accomplished something. And this kind of work gives me a sense on my best days that I might actually be making a very small difference in the world I and my classmates from the class of 76 will leave behind, for you who are current students and recent graduates.

So what am I saying to you, those of you seeking to begin a career or maybe some of you who are at one of those moments in life when one reinvents oneself? I am most emphatically not saying the path I’ve followed is the right one for you. In fact, as I look at my own children – Ariana, who attended Brown and the UC Bren school of environmental management and is now sustainability coordinator for the company which makes Uggs and Tevas, among others; and Scott, a classicist dedicated to ancient history, a Princeton graduate currently doing a Master’s at Cambridge to be followed by a PhD at Stanford in the same field and contemplating a career in teaching, I KNOW that each of us is called to different types of service. So, I guess I’m saying that if I have learned anything, it is that everyone, no matter their career or their professional path, can make a difference. That doing so requires little more than being open to opportunities, exercising
enough imagination to imagine the possible instead of seeing the impossible, and being willing to take detours. It also requires action even if that is in unfamiliar directions.

To quote my Grandmother, born in the 1800s, who buried 2 husbands and saw even more changes in her lifetime than we have, “I try to do at least one thing each day that scares me.” And hold in mind the graffiti which is on a wall at one of the Institutes in Afghanistan, in Shebergan near where Alexander the Great was married. None of us know in advance the picture that will have been formed by our own paths and pieces when we look back – but I hope that yours is colored and strengthened by service that is important to you – and to the communities of people and this earth we share, to whom all of us can in some sense be of service.