

"Journeys" are special University Lectures in which Carnegie Mellon faculty members share their reflections on their journeys – the everyday actions, decisions, challenges and joys that make a life.



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4:30pm – Rangos 1 & 2, University Center

The Accidental President

I am skeptical about life plans and people who believe that they can plot every step of their lives. I'm not against goal setting; indeed, it is very important to have ambitious goals and to pursue them. But, it's one thing, say, to seek a Ph.D. because of a deep interest in a field; it's quite another to plot a course at the age of 21 to become a university president.

My own journey to the presidency of Carnegie Mellon was anything but planned. In retrospect, one could lay out a nice neat path, from middle-class high school kid, maybe even infant, in Cleveland, Ohio to my current station in life -- like a "Trip Tik" from AAA complete with itinerary -- but the truth is that each leg of the journey was pursued for its own value without particular regard for what would come next. I believe that this is as it should be, although at times I can't avoid feeling like Forest Gump in the movie of the same name, in which the most outrageous and audacious things happen to the simple (but completely authentic) title character, apparently by sheer accident (or was it fate?).

I am not a fatalist. Rather, I believe that the goals and plans that you set for yourself can do no more than prepare you to take advantage of the opportunities that arise. (Not coincidentally, this is more or less how Carnegie Mellon has led its institutional life for the last several decades.) Most important, though, is to enjoy each leg of the journey, no matter where you ultimately end up.