Thank you so much President Nikias. Thank you to all the platform committee here. Thank you to all the families and friends. And especially to you, the students of 2012, for inviting me here. Thank you so much and congratulations!

To all the students who are American and to all the students who have come from far and wide around the world, many, many congratulations. I know that you foreign students will have come here to enrich the society that you found yourself in and to gain so much from this society and perhaps for one day to take it back to further enrich your own countries.

I cannot believe I have to follow Genevieve. Congratulations on that clarion call to arms. And congratulations to the four young ladies with the perfect 4.0.

I am so incredibly staggered to follow to know that this university has had so many unbelievable people who have come to stand at this stage and who have been honored with honorary degrees. I read, obviously, the roster, I cannot believe that Neil Armstrong was here. I remember when I was 11 years old my mom woke me up to watch him take that giant leap onto the moon and how unbelievably heart stopping that was. I remember being so, to this day, unbelievably swept away by the genius of what America is in every which way and that huge, huge step that he made for all of us.

And I can’t believe that I follow someone like Rosa Parks onto this stage, that wonderful, wonderful steely, beautiful, determined woman, who simply had enough and would not be pushed around anymore and just by sitting still, moved mountains for all of us.

And the struggle continues, as you all know, the struggles between races, the struggles between the haves and the have-nots, the struggles between ethnic groups, religions, between whatever sexual preference here and around the world. And I continue to cover that struggle, both here and around the world.

Perhaps, especially today, there is that struggle and you, the class of 2012, are heading full tilt into it. The gap between the haves and the have-nots is increasing, and it is unacceptable, as you all know, as time passes, that that should be the trend and not the reverse. I hope you and your generation will work hard to reverse that, because we live in a generation where that is also unacceptable.

I pay tribute to all of those people who I mentioned today and I pray that you too, just like them, find something that sets you on fire and gives you a huge sense of mission and passion and purpose. I am not talking about those super heroes that I mentioned in any form of comparison but simply to point out, as a great Brazilian soccer player once said, that

God gives each of us talents. He said, “He made me able to kick a soccer ball and I made the best of those talents.” He’s given all of us, all of you,
exceptional talents, and what counts is what you do with them.

I know that times are tough, I know the economy and the job market doesn’t look fantastic, but you, as Genevieve said, are the best equipped to come into this environment right now. You have received a fantastic education. You have families who will help you out, I’m sure. They will help you with your rents. They will help to having you to stay. Perhaps you’ll take several jobs. Perhaps it will be slightly untraditional what you do. And perhaps, you might even go abroad, maybe to take jobs abroad, maybe to take another gap here and to volunteer. Not just to enrich yourselves but to enrich the societies that you go out. And this will be a transformative experience because you will come back with the skills and the knowledge, and life changing experience, to put to work back here in the United States.

I did think that President Nikias had given me an impossible task, to ask me to come here and talk and inspire you at this particular time in history, but I do think that all of us should not be daunted that this is difficult times but they are not times that cannot be overcome.

I dug back and I looked back to 1982 when I graduated from the University of Rhode Island and I found that actually at that time the United States was in a severe recession. Unemployment stood at 10.8%; they were the worst of times at that time since the great depression. But yet, I was on fire. I didn’t pay attention to that and I didn’t allow it to daunt me. I had my own amazing tsunami of possibility and hope, and I was young and I was going in and was ready to embrace this world with both hands and all arms. And I wanted to tell you that some of this some of my journey to this stage, and perhaps some of your journeys will come perhaps with a few mistakes, perhaps with some failures, perhaps with some loss. For me, my big failure when I was your age – actually before your age – I failed my exams to get into medical school, so I wondered around in the wilderness for a awhile not knowing what to do with myself, because I had set my heart on being a doctor.

And then, after I had grown up in Iran in what you might call sort of genteel privilege, because we weren’t rich but we were comfortable, I had parents who gave me the most fantastic set of values, I had a joyful childhood, I had a good education, and I really was in a good place.

But in 1979 a huge earthquake, a political earthquake swept my country, it was the Islamic revolution, it hurled me out of my comfort zone. It turned my life upside down. It did happen when I was twenty though…old enough to get it. Practically overnight we were turned into strangers in our own land. We lost our homes. We lost our friends. We lost our possessions. We watched, I did anyway as a young girl, horrified, as friends and family members were arrested and jailed and tortured, and some were even executed. That was my loss, and yet I knew, like so many people who come to the United States, out of so much loss and hardship to seek a new world, that none of us can afford to wallow, none of us can afford to give in to what we’re confronted by. We have to turn failure and loss into our driving forces and that is what I did.

I knew that I needed to come here to the United States, because this was the country where if you had a dream and you worked hard you could perhaps make it in the world. And I knew that as a young girl, even as far away as Iran.

So I came here to the wonderful University of Rhode Island, I graduated, I got my first unpaid internship, and then I pounded the pavement for my first job – I hope you will all do that as well. I took the lowest of the lowest of the lowliest jobs and I worked like a demon to climb the ladder.
And the next part of the story, and all of your stories, will be to say yes and to embrace what life puts in front of you. It’s also about love and it’s about passion.

For me, I am so privileged to be able to have worked at CBS’ 60 Minutes, to work now at ABC News, but of course for me it all started at CNN. It started when I was that unpaid intern in Rhode Island, and colleagues there said to me, “You know, there’s a great opportunity for somebody like yourself who's foreign, who has a foreign accent. We hear all these foreign accents on CNN. It's wild, who knows, maybe they'll take you on!”

And in those days, CNN was practically a start-up, and of course in this state you know all about start-ups. So 29 years ago I arrived in Atlanta at CNN HQ with about 100 dollars, I had a bicycle, I had my suitcase. My first day on the job, the recruiter said, “Hey, you’re foreign! We’ve got a vacancy on the foreign desk, go to the foreign desk.” So I thought that’s great, because actually I wanted to be a foreign correspondent.

It was heaven. I did fetch a lot of coffees and dinners for my boss, and my starting salary was less than $10,000. It was fantastic; I lived within my means, and I learned from the very bottom and I climbed every single rung of that ladder.

It was really exciting because we were pioneers. In fact, we were mostly all undergraduates who had gone to this new revolutionary thing that Ted Turner had created hoping that that would be our graduate school, that we would learn on the job, and then progress to the big leagues.

Little did we know then that CNN would become the big leagues. We adored being the little network that could. It was called Chicken Noodle News, and we thought that was hilarious! As I said, we were part of a revolution. Ted Turner changed the world with 24-hour news, and we really didn’t mind being mocked as we ended up kicking butt all over the world and having a great time doing it.

As I look out at you my most fervent hope is that you, too, find a passion, you’ll find a sense of purpose, and of course, that you will master what t is that you choose to do.

I want you to find something that you believe so much in that you’ll want to work day and night and you want to sacrifice to do what it is that you are committed to doing.

And that is, of course, what what your twenties and thirties are for. It is to the wall, it is having to work hard to do it, but you’re indomitable now, you’re invincible now, now is your moment and the world is waiting for you.

And as I said, don’t ever fear failure. Those are just mistakes that are indispensable to your success. It’s a way of sorting through the tumbleweed that comes on your journey, and it’s a way of sorting the direction that you’re meant to go. And I know that I would never be here on this stage, and I never would have had what I have if I hadn’t had to go through that difficulty. And I know that what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.

Choose well and choose carefully because unless you love what you do, you can’t really be good at what you do. This passion is so important to be able to give our world and whatever you choose to do your all.

As a journalist, and with all my high-falutin’ dreams, nothing really prepared me for the intensity of the work that I took on and that I have done over the past 22 years in the field.

I have spent, as President Nikias said, the past two decades in the most horrendous places. I have borne witness to some of the most horrific events
of the end of our era, at the end of the 20th century and the beginning of the 21st. And because CNN is viewed all over the world, to an extent I have become so identified with those disasters that whenever I arrive somewhere, people sort of suck in their breath in horror, and say, “Oh my god. Amanpour is coming. I hope something bad is not going to happen to us.”

But going around, I’ve had this amazing and sometimes overwhelming sense of awe, at the heart-stopping importance of everything that I was able to witness, all that’s gone on, both here and in the rest of the world. Sometimes good, sometimes bad. There were the good wars that I covered, and there were the bad wars that I covered. There were the famines where there was intervention that was good and saved lives, and then there were the famines and the starvations that nobody cared about, and so many people died.

Whether I was watching as the Iron Curtain quietly fell away from eastern Europe and decades of tyranny were simply, quietly swept away; or now, when I went for ABC over the last year and witnessed the huge and boisterous uprisings that have swept the Arab and Muslim world in the Arab Spring, with most of those young people just like you, finally shouting, “Here we are! Here is the face of the young, moderate Arab and Muslim youth who you’ve been looking so fervently for, especially since 9/11. We are just like you, and we want just what you have.”

The next part of my story is about the questions, because all of a sudden, I found – and you’ll find – that you’re doing something that you absolutely love, but it actually might bring you a position of privilege and a position of power. So sometimes I also have to say if you do get into that position of privilege, and power and authority, whatever you do don’t become mini-autocrats or dictators. I see it in every single walk of life. Somehow people who get to the very top, unless they’re really well-grounded, think that somehow they then become all-powerful and all-important. No, we have to all remain humble and remember that there but for the grace of God go I, and yet go all of us. You’ll get there too!

But I asked, what is the point of this fantastic job and this great platform, what is the purpose? I began to understand it was a position of unique responsibility, this journalism that I’m doing and this incredible platform that reaches so far, just because of the technology that enables it to reach so far. And if nothing else I have to answer my son, who is now 12, why I am going away again and sometimes into danger.

So I do this, and I continue to go into danger, and I continue to really sort of … what’s the right word?... to lust, really, on behalf of this unbelievable passion, and this incredible profession, because I believe in it, and I believe that journalism matters. And I believe that even though so much of our profession, sadly, is awash in a sea of sensationalism, a sea of trivia, and a shortage of seriousness, I remain convinced that good journalism still matters and still can and does make a difference.

And where we journalists go, and where we choose to shine our lights, the words we use, all of those have consequences, and everything matters. Despite the fact that we are being shamefully robbed of resources we need to go out and cover the world, and especially at a time when the world is so important – the globalization, the interconnectedness, the interdependence of everything that we do here in the United States, whether it’s the economy, whether it’s science, whether it’s national security, whatever it is – education – it is all globally interconnected.

One of my colleagues once sensibly said that our role is to report the world, not just to enrich our shareholders, and a former European prime minister said that we do, after all, live in a community, not just a marketplace. And
sometimes when I talk about a community, I have
to say we’ve got to start talking to each other
again, we’ve got to start having conversations
with our voices, instead of just our fingers and
thumbs! We need to look each other in the eye
instead of constantly down at that mobile device.

And we’ve got to listen to each other; pull out
those tubes, those wires that are in your ears for a
while, and be able to have conversations, talk
about it, be creative, find solutions, meet our
opportunities and our challenges, because nothing –
nothing – substitutes for face to face
conversation, community, and relationships.

I believe, despite conventional wisdom, that
Americans do care about the world, do care about
their position in the world, do care about the
unique gifts that you singly have to give to the
rest of the world. And therefore I believe, despite
conventional wisdom and many of our
organizations, that I need, and we need, all of us
foreign correspondents, to keep telling the stories
about the rest of the world.

Thomas Jefferson once said that an informed
citizenry is the bulwark of every democracy – he
said “of a democracy,” but I think it’s the bulwark
of every democracy. And I believe that every
robust democracy, even this one, needs and
informed citizenry, which often does in fact
depend, or at least somewhat on journalists of
integrity who are robust, who are rigorous, who
will ask the tough questions, and who will always
report without fear or favor.

And I do it because I believe we must all speak
the truth, whether as a journalist, or whatever job,
whatever profession, whatever role you find
yourself in, whether it’s comfortable or not.

We must all understand that whether we disagree
or dissent, that is never to be confused with
disloyalty. We must never, ever, whatever job we
do, whatever role we play, be browbeaten into
believing that disloyal is synonymous with
disagreeing, or that any one person or group has a
monopoly on the truth.

As I said, I am convinced that everyone who has a
voice must use it very, very carefully for our
common good. And all of us have to find our
voices, and you will, if you haven’t already.

And of course the last stop of this journey is
about courage and bravery. It’s about
taking risks and looking for risks – don’t
avoid them, take them, jump at them – whenever
you can.

Before I came here, a friend of mine reminded me
of the words of Eleanor Roosevelt a long, long
time ago. A bit of wisdom. She said, “Do one
thing that scares you every day. It is good for the
soul.”

And whatever you do, whatever you do, one day
you will have to decide how far you push the
envelope. One day, when you are least expecting
it, you will be called upon to take a stand, and to
be courageous. And courage is not just physical
bravery, courage is also intellectual and moral
bravery.

Someone I looked up to, and who was a mentor to
me at 60 Minutes was Mike Wallace, who died
after such a long and illustrious career just a few
weeks ago. And at his memorial service, his
colleagues were remembering, “There was a
greatness to him…his audacity…his total lack of
fear…his courage…”

When confronting even the most powerful, or
should I say especially the powerful, Mike was
out to get the truth, and would never let anyone
off the hook until he got that truth.

In the past year, I have lost many friends and
colleagues friends who have gone out to get the
truth, to shine that spotlight, and to expose what
needs to be exposed, whether it be in Libya or
Syria and elsewhere. Going out to try to right a
wrong that continues wherever we look and to tell the good news about what’s going on, because as journalists we are not just the cynics, we are not just there to tell the bad news. When there is good news, and when there are solutions, that is also our responsibility.

As I said, it is also moral and intellectual courage. Whatever you choose, whether it’s journalism, whether it’s business, whether it’s science, whether it’s medicine, whether it’s the arts, each and every one of you will one day have to summon that. Standing up to colleagues, being in some way or another a whistleblower, trying to right a wrong wherever you find it.

Imagine being a doctor. Your Hippocratic oath is to do good, to save lives, to do no harm. And yet if you are a doctor in Bahrain today, and you try to cure or treat or patch up a protester, as a doctor doing our job you could be carted off to prison and worse by the authorities. So even being a doctor in some of these places will require huge and immense courage.

In the genocides that I covered in Bosnia and in Rwanda – and I pay tribute to everything that General Dallaire did to tell the truth about what happened in Rwanda – I met scores and scores of brave, brave people who were willing to stand against their tribe, and shelter and protect and give life to members of the other tribe. That’s hugely important, and one day, maybe each one of you will face the need to stand up for somebody who’s being unfairly, unjustly, immorally oppressed.

We have to stand up, we have to protest, we have to resist, we have to challenge conventional wisdom, and as I said as a journalist I am not just expected to go into the danger zones, and be a witness and be the eyes and ears, but I am also expected to ask the tough questions. I am expected not to be liked, I am expected not to be asked into the club of the rich and the powerful, I am expected to do my job. I am expected never to draw a false equivalence, I am expected never to draw a moral equivalence, I am expected never to mistake between right and wrong, or victim and aggressor. And to understand that, sometimes we have to admit that the truth, or the preponderance of it, is on one side.

And I recall the words of Robert Kennedy who once said, when he was in South Africa at the heart of apartheid, that “few men,” I will add few women, “are willing to brave the disapproval of their fellows, the censure of their colleagues, the wrath of their society. Moral courage is an even a rarer commodity than bravery in battle or great intelligence. And yet it is the essential and vital quality for those who seek to change the world.”

And each and every one of you is going out to change the world. And you can do it, and I know that you will do it. And as you go out to do well for yourselves, please also do good for your communities, your families, and our wider world.

I wish, as I said, that you find something that sets you on fire, that you go out and have great fun and a great passion doing it. And I hope that you don’t feel the need to hurry too much on the road. Don’t feel impatient, don’t feel entitled, or that the world owes you, or that you have to be at the top of your profession a week after leaving graduate school, or a week after leaving your university right now. It takes time, and it’s great, and every single rung of that ladder – the climb is the most fun and the most rewarding.

And I believe that the secret in the end is that really it is the journey that counts, and the amount of love that we all put into it.

Thank you so much, good luck and goodbye!