Honorable Rector, Professors, Distinguished Guests, Parents, and most of all, dear graduating students

I am deeply pleased to be with you today on this joyful occasion of your graduation. You should all be proud of what you have accomplished. Your hard work has paid off, and many new challenges and adventures lie ahead.

But first, let me share the good news. This will be one of the last lectures you have to attend. It will be short. You don’t need to take notes. And there won’t be a test at the end. All that is now behind you!

It is hard for me to believe that I was sitting in your seat now two decades ago, when I myself graduated from Stanford Law School—it still feels like yesterday. So let me try and reflect a bit on the journey since.

When in went to Stanford Law in the 1990s, doing human rights law as a career was something that barely existed. I still remember going to the career office the first year, and telling them I wanted to do an internship in human rights for the summer vacation. They looked at me rather blankly, and tried to convince me I’d be better off going to a law firm, where I’d be guaranteed a job. When I insisted that was not what I wanted to do, they politely suggested I’d be better off going to the library looking for internship leads, as there wasn’t much they could do for me.

So off to the library I went, and I started writing letters to various organizations in South Africa, which was then transitioning from apartheid to democracy. My first letter, to a lawyer named Dullah Omar, came back with a polite rejection, saying he was soon going to take up another job—little did I know he was about to become the Minister of Justice of South Africa! But with a bit of persistence, I ended up working for George Bizos, the personal lawyer of Nelson Mandela, and embarked on a career that would take me to the frontlines of conflicts around the world.

But let’s slow down a bit. As a proud Stanford Law student, I went off to South Africa, fully expecting to have a lot to teach them about law—the opposite turned out to be true. I was very privileged, and very lucky, to end up working on some of the first constitutional cases in South Africa, including the landmark case abolishing the death penalty, and assisting George Bizos and that justice minister who rejected my internship, Dullah Omar, in drafting the legislation for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that did so much to heal the wounds of a divided and brutalized nation.

What I learned that year, from those brave lawyers, is that law is a living, breathing thing, and an extremely powerful tool to stand up for the rights and dignity of our fellow human beings. For decades, these brave men and women lawyers in South Africa had used the law as a last defense against apartheid, using the dignity and respect commanded by their profession to challenge every aspect of this inhumane system. They literally used their black robes as a shield to fight evil. And ultimately, they won: they brought down the apartheid system.
Many paid a heavy price. Braam Fischer, once a chairman of the South African Bar and Nelson Mandela’s chief defense lawyer at the Rivonia trial, was himself later sentenced to life in prison for his political activities, and only released when he was dying of cancer. Braam’s desk remained at the office I worked, and when our boss Arthur Chaskalson became South Africa’s first President of the Constitutional Court, he took Braam’s desk with him, perhaps giving him the satisfaction of victory in the afterlife.

After falling in love and picking up a life partner in one of my fellow lawyers in South Africa, I set off on a different path, going to work for Human Rights Watch after finishing my legal studies. Fresh out of law school, I found myself confronted with a very different reality from the legal battlefields of South Africa: suddenly I was in Kosovo, in the midst of real battlefields, stepping into villages that were still in flames after the latest Serbian paramilitary offensive, with the bodies of children, women, and men still strewn around. It was a terrible to find oneself among such hatred, horror and suffering. Literally hundreds of thousands of people were forced to flee their homes, and my colleague and I were tasked with documenting and publicizing their plight.

Faced with this challenge, we decided to radically overhaul our methodology, to allow us to report on atrocities in real time, and to try and save lives when we could—all while keeping our reputation for accuracy. We worked to incorporate various technologies into our work, from using satellite imagery to document the destruction of war to the use of social media to publicize the horrors of war.

And our innovation worked. Today, we can report more immediately on what is happening in the world, and achieve much greater impact. Our work in the Central African Republic—a country virtually unknown to the world which came close to a genocidal conflict in 2014—drew the world’s attention and led to the deployment of a UN peacekeeping force and an investigation by the International Criminal Court. In Syria, we established that the Assad government was responsible for chemical weapon attacks against its own people, and our reporting led to the abolishment of one of the world’s last chemical weapons arsenals.

Yes, we are a world in deep turmoil—from the devastating conflicts in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, to the economic crisis in Greece, the rising threat of terrorism, to climate change, the challenge of 65 million refugees in the world, and now Brexit. But these profound challenges will not disappear if we chose to ignore them, and we need to summon the courage to confront the challenges with common-sense solutions that are grounded in our values.

Those values matter. They are the values that built our societies, and that are the foundation for our security. When we turn against those values and close the door on those fleeing the turmoil in Syria, our decisions undermine respect for human rights, and threaten our security. Brussels and Paris were not attacked by refugees from Syria: they were attacked by Belgian and French citizens who had gone to fight in Syria, and the refugees fleeing from Syria are fleeing from the same terrorists who attacked our cities. If we want to be effective in fighting extremism and terrorism, we have to do our share in welcoming those fleeing from terrorism.
This beautiful University has been a place of refuge for intellectuals and religious dissidents for century. It is here that people like Sir Thomas More and Erasmus came to publish their writings five centuries ago, a safe haven from persecution and extremism. The strength of our University is its diversity, its ability to welcome and nurture thinkers from all over the world.

In its more recent history, the University has also taught us important values. My father was one of the student leaders who made this University a Flemish institution—not because they hated their Walloon neighbors, but because they wanted to be taught in their own language. Instead of going down the path of the right-wing nationalism we see on the rise all over Europe, the University of Leuven did not turn inwards but became a global innovation leader, learning from the rest of the world. Piet De Somer, our first rector, soon sent my father to the United States to learn from their Universities, and then established the Leuven Research and Development Center which became a driving force in the fields of biotechnology and genetic engineering. We learned from the rest of the world, and that globalist vision is why this historic institution you are graduating from has become one of the most respected universities in the world.

I am not telling you all of this out of the hope that you will all become human rights activists. But there are a few things I would like you to realize.

The first is that the most precious gift you receive today is not the piece of paper certifying you managed to graduate from the Law Faculty. You carry the most precious gift within yourself: it is the brain you have honed so carefully through those difficult years of study. And it’s now time to put that precious gift to use, to use those skills to achieve your dreams, and hopefully play your part in helping make this a better world in some way.

Second, I hope you realize how extremely lucky and privileged you are to have received this education, and the skills that go with it. For the past year, I’ve witnessed so many thousands of Syrian families take that perilous journey from their destroyed homes to the shores of Europe. They risk execution by the Islamic State, drownings at sea, and the humiliations along the journey for one simple reason: they first and foremost want their children to be educated and have a better future.

We don’t need to feel guilty for not having had to make such sacrifices for an education: you as well have worked hard to get here. But we should be thankful, and we should make sure not to squander our good privilege to have benefited from a good education.

Third, please realize that this beautiful little planet we live on is the only one we have, and it belongs to us. I say that because it is important we take ownership of our home, and of its problems—environmental, economic, climate, and rights. We cannot look away from the challenges our world faces, and we as leaders have to have the courage to come up with solutions to those problems.
And finally, let me end up on a slightly different note, if my learned colleagues of the Law Faculty allow. Please remember that a career in law may be your future, but there is more to life than even the most rewarding career. Twenty years from graduation, my happiest fellow graduates are those who embraced not just a career, but a fully lived life, with time for a family, and other passions outside their work. Such a balance isn’t always easy to achieve, but believe it or not, there is much more to enjoy in life than the law. I hope you all will remember that!

My congratulations to you all, and enjoy the road ahead!