I've been crying since you guys marched out. I am...thrilled. President Byerly, or Allie B, as I've heard you're called, Board of trustees, faculty and staff, thank you for welcoming me back home. To the fabulous class of 2023, thank you for the incredible honor of being your commencement speaker and for the honorary degree that comes with it. And Cristina and Bahar, I haven't had to follow an act like that, a tough act like that since I followed President Obama in a wedding toast. And he did his without notes. But your words are a perfect illustration of what I want to say today.

But before I begin, seems Donald Trump's indictments have been perfectly timed for maximum disruption of joyous moments for me. His first indictment came just 36 hours after I arrived in Italy. That resulted in a 2 1/2-hour, 100-mile-an-hour-plus car ride from Tuscany to Rome to catch a flight back to New York for special coverage on MSNBC early the next morning. And today, I will have to leave immediately after my remarks to catch a one o'clock flight to New York to once again be part of special coverage later tonight and my regular show tomorrow. So, my apologies in advance to all of you, especially the graduates, for the disruption to come.

So where was I? 10 years ago this September, I had the honor of speaking to the incoming class of 2017 at the invitation of President Poskanzer, or Stevie P, as I hear he was called. In that speech, I shared some of my fondest memories of this glorious place, chief among them was how I came to be here, sight unseen. I first heard about Carleton in the early 1980s from a then rising freshman and future Carleton trustee named Carol Barnett. We met on a student council convention trip to Reno, Nevada, and it was there that I learned about this magical place in Northfield, Minnesota.

When my time came, I wrote to the admissions office for information. See, back then, there was no Google Maps, no Street View. Heck, there was no internet. You had to wait for the packet to arrive days later in the mail. One of the pamphlets inside featured all sorts of pretty pictures of campus. Even Goodhue looked chic tucked back in the woods. I flipped through it so many times, the pages no longer gripped the staples holding them in place. The watercolor of Skinner Chapel on the cover captured my imagination.

One of my favorite Carleton stories happened long before I was even accepted. Beth Clary was the saint in the admissions office who fielded my multiple
daily phone calls with any number of questions. See, this was before email too. No matter how inane or naive the question, Ms. Clary had an answer. Heeding my mother's warning about becoming a pest, I didn't call one day. The very next day, the phone rang at home, “I didn't hear from you yesterday,”Ms. Clary said. “So, I wanted to make sure everything was all right.” Her patience and care was one of the single most important factors in my choosing Carleton. And it was why, when that van from the Minneapolis airport rounded the bend, where Union turns into 1st Street, my heart soared, for I saw Skinner Chapel standing in the sun and I felt at home.

This place, where my freshman roommate, Tim Kirker, allowed me to adopt his wardrobe as my own. The room was 302 Myers, which I discovered yesterday during a campus tour with Stella Dennehy was her freshman dorm room too. You’re on to greatness, Stella. This place, where I learned to ballroom dance by never changing Sarah Anderson as my dance partner. This place, where I earned my lowest GPA because I spent my junior winter term shuttling between the basement of Sayles as the news director of KRLX and the second floor of Sayles as the news editor of "The Carletonian". As Aldo Polanco writes in his farewell column as editor-in-chief of "The Carletonian", It's not like it's about the classes anyways." This place, where I met Matthew Brooks, my best friend and one of the only out-gay students on campus, whose dignity and spine of steel have tried to emulate as an out-gay man myself. This place, where my March 6th, 1987, front-page "Carletonian" expose, “Homosexuals at Carleton” was a labor of love to give voice to the truth of lesbian, gay and bisexual students, while attempting to find my own. Where Becky’s Zrimsek fired me from "The Carletonian" after I helped start a rival publication called "The COW". “The Carleton Observer Weekly”, that published the day before "The Carletonian" and scooped it on several stories. I mean, she wasn't wrong. This place, where I didn't meet Schiller, until today! (student runs on-stage to grab Schiller bust) This place…yeah, run Forrest, run!

This place, where Steve Lewis, then the still very new president of Carleton, gave me my first job after graduation as assistant to the president. His nickname was Skeech. I first met Steve when I was a student representative on the Presidential Search Committee. The kind man I met during his on-campus interview remains a mentor. And I am thrilled that he and his wife, Judy, another guardian angel of mine, are here today. Seeing them, seeing all of you is a heart…sorry, here it comes again.
A heart-filling reminder that just about every good thing that’s happened in my life can be traced back to my decision to come here.

In fact, my first four jobs out of college, my career had their origins here, you know about the assistant to the president of Carleton job. After that, I was assistant to the president of WNYC, who was then Carleton board member, Tom Morgan, class of 1949. He had just been appointed by the mayor of New York City to run the city's radio and television stations, and heard I was looking for jobs in television in New York or Washington. And as a result of working for Tom, I landed the job that launched my newspaper career, editorial writer at "The New York Daily News". I was working as a researcher at "The Today Show" when I received a call from the paper's opinion editor, Bob Laird. They were looking for young people who could write for the editorial page and he got my name from Tom, who as press secretary to New York City Mayor John Lindsay back in the ’60s, had been Bob's boss at City Hall. But it is how I ended up at "The Today Show" that is my most treasured Carleton story, one that took place before I got into Carleton.

My face-to-face admissions interview took place at the New York Hilton, just a few blocks from NBC’s home at 30 Rock. Afterwards, I called my uncle, McKinley, an electrician at NBC, and asked if I could drop by for a visit. By the time I got to him, he was starting to head out to do something in one of the "Nightly News" offices and asked if I wanted to come. A rhetorical question from my uncle, since he'd long known that his nephew was a big old news nerd. But instead of seeing great like Tom Brokaw or Garrick Utley, Carleton class of 1961, I saw a lone woman sitting at her desk, reading the paper, drinking coffee and eating a bagel. Her name was Ann Skakel Terrien. Sitting on a sofa opposite her, I worked up the courage to ask her what she did there. Ms. Terrien worked at "Nightly News", she told me, then she asked me, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" In a teenage torrent of oversharing, I told her how I loved "The Today Show", how I wanted to be a correspondent in Moscow and then London and then maybe the White House. How I wanted to be the next Bryant Gumbel. When my uncle said it was time to go, I thanked Ms. Terrien for her time and started to walk away. That's when she said, "Wait a minute," and she pulled out a pad and wrote down a name, Kay Bradley, and her phone number. Ms. Terrien ripped off the page, handed it to me and said, "Get yourself an internship on 'The Today Show'."
So many things have happened since then, I left journalism twice. The first time you heard was to help Mike Bloomberg get elected, mayor of New York City. The second time to fail miserably as a businessman. By the time I came back to Carleton to deliver that opening convocation 10 years ago, I was back on track, back in journalism, at "The Washington Post" and at MSNBC as a contributor.

I shared four lessons that day that continue to serve me well and bear repeating, have a North Star, something that drives you and keeps you grounded and focused when things go haywire, 'cause they always do. Spot your guardian angels and be grateful for them. These are the folks who guide you in the right direction, or at least try to. Some of them you know, many of them you don’t. Don’t be afraid to take reasonable risks. The biggest moments of your life will be because of a personal or professional risk you take. And finally, learn from your failures. Just as with taking risks, the biggest lessons of your life will come from what you learn from failure, about yourself, about other people, and about what you want and don’t want out of life.

Those lessons bear repeating because you’re going to need them when I give you the one piece of information you can't possibly know right now, although I think some of you do, but you need to know right now. And here it is: You don't know anything. You don't know as much as you think you do about how the world works. I tell you this in the hopes of freeing you from the frustration, disappointment, maybe even anger you will feel when you experience how the theoretical can collapse under the weight of real life. So now that you have this precious piece of information, here’s how best to make it work for you. Don’t be afraid to say, "I don't know," when you actually don’t know. What you learn in response will be invaluable. Don’t be afraid to ask what you might think is a dumb question, because I guarantee you, someone else at the table or in the room is wondering the exact same thing. Again, what you learn in response will be invaluable.

Now, let me take a little detour here, because there will come a time when someone else will ask a dumb question and you are the one with the answer, or convinced you are the one with the answer. The most important thing you can do in those moments is listen. Think of it as an adventure, one where you could meet a kindred spirit or where you could be challenged by someone espousing viewpoints diametrically opposed to your beliefs, your values, your moral core. That can be hard to do in our polarized times when the issues that animate discourse feel existential,
race relations, our planet, bodily autonomy, gun violence, or are reduced to inflammatory buzzwords that strip the subject of their meaning and the people affected by them of their humanity and dignity. CRT, woke, groomer. Trust me, as an out-gay, married Black man of a certain age, I have listened to more than my fair share of offensive opinions, but I wouldn't be good at my job if I didn't listen.

As much as I may prepare for an interview with the president of the United States or someone thrust into the public eye for the first time, the most revelatory moments come from the questions I've asked because I listened to what the person is telling me in the moment. Listening turns an interview or small talk into a real conversation. But if you find yourself trying to convince someone else, you're right, you're doing it all wrong. Listening is about respect, a two-way street where we give and receive it through our attentiveness, thoughtful questions or comments, maybe even a little good-natured, intellectual jousting. That's what David Brooks and I do every Friday night on "The PBS NewsHour". Our conversation works because we are actively listening to each other. And the enormous respect I have for David makes it possible for me to hear what he is saying, even if I don't agree. But and let me be clear about this, as much as respect requires you to hear someone out, to meet them halfway, respect does not require you to deny your beliefs or surrender your values. Respect demands that you stand up for them and for yourself, firmly, but respectfully. And being in that situation is never easy, but the information you glean in those moments will allow you to better understand the world as it is, not as you wish it or imagine it to be. And this is where my detour merges into the final piece of information I wanted to share.

Don't be afraid to look at the world as it is, and not only ask why things aren't better, but also ask how they could be better. And what gives me hope for our nation, class of 2023, is that you already excel at this. You and your generation are fearless in looking at things the way they are and demanding they be better. So much has happened between that 2013 opening convocation and today's commencement.

When I addressed them in 2013, President Obama had already been reelected to a second term, but by their senior year, we had a president who took delight in stirring up racial tensions, ignored limitations on his power imposed by the Constitution, and diminished the moral authority of the Oval Office by siding with white supremacists. Class of 2023, you've lived through a lot too. Six months into your freshman year, a global pandemic literally shut down the world for most of your
college career. In the middle of it, there was an election that gave us a new president and an insurrection to overturn his free and fair election. The murder of George Floyd and the militarized response to the nationwide uproar it inspired. And then the Supreme Court took a sledgehammer to women's right to choose by overturning Roe v. Wade, and their bodily autonomy has come under assault by states now limiting or criminalizing reproductive healthcare. But when I think of you and your generation and the hope you inspire in me, I think back to what happened when you were just juniors in high school.

The mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, unleashed an activism by the Parkland kids and young people around the nation like none we had seen in recent memory. One week after the massacre, Parkland survivors and others descended upon Tallahassee to demand action, and it was there that survivor, Alfonso Calderon, marked you as my hope for this nation. In calling for a change in gun safety laws, he said, quote, "Change might not come today, it might not come tomorrow, but it's going to happen, and it's going to happen before my lifetime because I will fight every single day." Alfonso's words moved me beyond measure, for that child born into a world of instant gratification understood that his fight would not be won overnight, it would require persistence and determination. And I call Alfonso, "That child," and refer to the students who rose up as, "The Parkland kids," on purpose.

Dr. Martin Luther King might've been the revered leader of the Civil Rights Movement, but the struggle to have African Americans fully share in the promise of America was propelled by the marching feet of young people, of children. 60 years ago last month, hundreds of them protested segregation, what became known as the Birmingham Children's Campaign. They were jailed, they were beaten, they were set upon by snarling police dogs. The iconic photograph of a water cannon slamming into the back of a young Black boy, pinning him to a storefront window, became one of the defining images that helped move the cause forward. One month later, the, "Whites only," and, "Colored," signs that governed life in downtown Birmingham started coming down. The famed 1963 March on Washington took place two months later, one of the speakers was a young man named John Lewis, the future congressman from Georgia. "By the force of our demands, our determination and our numbers," Lewis said, "we shall splinter the segregated South into 1,000 pieces and put them together in the image of God and democracy." John Lewis, who had
already led a number of demonstrations, sit-ins and marches in the preceding years, was just 23 years old, about the age many of you are right now. Two years later, he was leading 600 people from Brown Chapel, in Selma, Alabama, on what was supposed to be a 50-mile march for voting rights to the state capital in Montgomery. Instead, less than a mile from Brown Chapel, Lewis and the others were savagely beaten and tear gassed by Alabama state troopers after having crossed over the Edmund Pettus Bridge. The harrowing images of what became known as Bloody Sunday sickened the nation and sparked action. Five months later, President Johnson signed the 1965 Voting Rights Act into law. I had the honor of going with Congressman Lewis on his annual pilgrimage to Selma and Montgomery four times, including his last time. Each time was a deeply moving journey, with the ordinary people, whose extraordinary actions changed American history.

Three years ago this week, my husband and I accompanied Congressman Lewis on a remarkable visit closer to home, high above the corner of 16th and K Streets in Washington, we watched as the great man looked down upon the bold yellow letters spelling out, "Black Lives Matter." He would pass away a little more than a month later. The man who pushed back against state-sanctioned violence and whose blood, sweat and tears helped bring about the 1964 Civil Rights Act, the 1965 Voting Rights Act, had lived long enough to see so much of what he worked for unravel. But Congressman Lewis was inspired by the thousands of Americans, of all ages, stations and orientations, who defied a pandemic to demonstrate against the murder of George Floyd. In what would be my last interview with him, I asked Congressman Lewis what he would tell you, the young people of America. And he said, “You must be able and prepared to give until you cannot give anymore. We must use our time and our space on this little planet that we call Earth to make a lasting contribution, to leave it a little better than we found it, and now that need is greater than ever before.”

You and your generation stand on the tiny shoulders of the Birmingham Children's Crusade. And you and your generation are the inheritors of the fire and spirit of a young John Lewis. You have not been afraid to get into what he called good trouble, necessary trouble. You've marched for your lives in the face of political indifference that defies popular sentiment. You stand up for LGBTQ+ rights, especially for your transgender friends and loved ones coming under relentless attack. You've exercised your right to vote in the face of active efforts to deny you the
franchise and the political power that comes with it. You fight for a woman's right to bodily autonomy. You fight for our planet. You demand that the birth right promise of liberty and freedom applies to all of us equally. Ours is not a perfect nation, but ours is a nation that strives for perfection, with a history of forward albeit incremental motion, despite the best efforts of those who want to turn back the clock to some good old days that never were.

My standing before you today is proof of it. I am a descendant of slaves, whose parents grew up in the segregated Jim Crow South. My cousins and I are the first generation in our family that didn't have to pick cotton. Fearful for my professional future, my mother's first words to me when I came out to her were, "Don't tell anyone." That was in 1990, in a totally different America, and look at me now. I'm an out-gay associate editor and columnist for "The Washington Post", an out-gay national television anchor on MSNBC, and the better-looking out-gay half of Brooks and Capehart on "PBS NewsHour". I was able to marry the man I love and have the ceremony officiated by Eric Holder, the attorney general of the United States, who made a key determination that made our marriage possible.

34 years from now, when one of you is standing here telling the class of 2057 about the world as it is and how it can and must be better, I have no doubt the world as it is then will be better than it is today. Dr. King was fond of saying, “The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice,” it doesn't bend on its own. It takes a generation of people with an idea of what justice should be, a generation of people with an idea of what justice should look like, a generation of people willing to give until you cannot give anymore to bend the arc of the moral universe in the right direction. You are that generation, Carleton class of 2023, and I could not be more relieved. Congratulations. Thank you. Thank you. We're gonna take a selfie.

Squeeze in. All right, thank you, and congratulations again.