



**University of Massachusetts Boston 46th Commencement
Boston, Massachusetts, USA 30 May 2014**

**Address by
Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change**

Chairman Thomas and members of the Board of Trustees,
President Caret,
Chancellor Motley,
Faculty and staff,
Honorees,
Families and friends, and of course those we honor today,
The UMass Boston Class of 2014

At the outset may I express how deeply moved I am by this honorary degree. I am truly honored to share a cap and gown with my distinguished fellow recipients, and above all with this extraordinary graduating class.

There are thousands of us gathered here today, but for me there is one person missing, and that is my long-departed Danish grandfather, who had asked me take the difficult path so many of you have taken to a real PhD degree. Fortunately, I suspect his loving nature would have forgiven me for having arrived via the alternative, far less meritorious, route. If Whatsapp could transcend our earthly boundaries, I would send him a photo of today. To all the grandparents in the crowd: your joy is deeply felt.

May I also confess that this is only my second commencement speech. I asked the graduating class I addressed a few years ago to let me know if my first one should be my last so I could warn any future inviting universities. Apparently, I gave them the wrong e-mail address because here I am again!

Friends, today is a day of many celebrations. I would like to congratulate U Mass Boston for 50 years of excellence. It is no small feat to open doors amid the civil rights activism and urban unrest of the 60's, and now be the most diverse public university in New England, with exceptional faculty and innovative research leading the academic world on so many fronts. Beacons of Boston, I salute you!

Now to the real stars of the day: the Class of 2014. What a wonderful sight from up here. I see several thousand caps and gowns. More importantly, I see several thousand agents of choice.

Before I utter my next thought, let me inform you that this year there are 150,000 commencement speeches in the US, and 2,000 of them right here in Boston. Granted, the graduates range from post docs to kindergarten, but I guarantee every one of the speeches calls for the graduates to "stand up and be counted". It is just not a commencement if it does not remind us of a greater purpose.

So here is our big idea: there is no greater power than the power of choice. The quality of your life, in fact your very life, is determined by the choices you make.

Simple, right? The concept is so simple, it amazes me how many times I have had to learn and relearn it. Frankly, I cannot even claim to remember it on a daily basis. If you, on the other hand, grasp this simple truth and act upon it, you will have mastered the greatest challenge of all, yourself.

Up to this point, many of your decisions have likely been made with much external help. Your parents may have chosen to support your studies over some more obvious pleasures for themselves. Your peers may have influenced you in the direction of a particular class, sport, or maybe even lifetime partner. Your professors may have turned down a much better paying job in order to have the joy of teaching you. In a sense you have been pushed, pulled and prodded into the seat you occupy this morning.

But as of today, your decisions are much more your own, based on the choices you make. Without a doubt you will be called upon to make choices at the personal, the public, and even the planetary level. You could see these levels as a ladder of choices, with each rung interconnected with the other.

Starting at the most immediate level – the personal.

Today you celebrate, not just now but late into the night I hope! Not all days will be like today. There will be days when you are knocked down by life, by events big and small. You have a choice. Stay on the floor and lick your wounds, or get back up, learn from the hit and grow stronger. That choice determines who you are as a person.

Today you will be congratulated by all whom you know. Tomorrow you will be criticized by some, betrayed or deeply hurt by one you love. You have a choice. React out of anger or revenge, or take the high road knowing we all carry sadness and pain, and everyone needs our patience and compassion. That choice defines how you walk the path of life.

The next level on the ladder – the public – is about your choices when you engage with your fellow citizens and the world, your public persona.

Today you may or may not know exactly what you are going to do tomorrow. If you do, that's great. If you don't, don't panic. We all discover our path one step at a time. In the end, which career you choose and what skills you develop to put to the service of others is less important than making those decisions based on the intentional choice to discover the fullness of yourself. That choice marks the depth with which you engage in the world.

And that brings me to the top rung of the ladder – the planetary level – the choice about what kind of planet you want to have and what kind of planet you want to leave for those who will graduate decades after you. You may think that is not a choice you want or need to make, but I am here to tell you that actually, that choice is by now unavoidable.

Class of 2014...you may or may not be aware of this, but right now, at this very moment, mankind is deciding what kind of planet you and your children will have, what kind of world you will live in, and you have a say in that decision.

There are two paths. One is a path of rising temperatures, rising insecurity and rising economic instability. The other is a path where a stable environment sustains growth over generations.

I am of course talking about the choice we are collectively making about our response to climate change. I am sure many of you had to Google me on your iPhone this morning because you had no idea who was behind that strange name on today's program. So it should be no surprise that I talk to you about climate change.

What may surprise you is the fact that climate change is no longer a threat: it is your new reality. The last time I was on this campus I spoke about climate change as a wicked problem. I assure you it has become no less wicked.

The science is clear and ever more sobering. We have only very limited time to transition to a low-carbon growth path. Bending the curve of greenhouse gas emissions must happen this decade and the trend must take us to global carbon neutrality in the second half of the century. A tall order from where we stand today.

The good news, however, is that increasing numbers of people are realizing that with the right choices in a timely fashion, we can construct a world where energy is clean, growth is sustainable and opportunities abound.

Collectively, we can choose that future, and individually you will make choices at all three rungs of the choice ladder: personal, public and planetary.

At a personal level, you can choose to be part of the solution by examining and reducing your own carbon footprint. You may be surprised at the results.

- Eating with conscience, eliminating food waste or adopting a vegetarian diet can be great for your health and for the earth;
- Walking, cycling, and using public transport and next-gen electric and alternative fuel vehicles are a functional and fun way to reduce emissions; and
- Voting for leaders who believe in science and technology enables a nimble response to challenges and ensures opportunity for you and for the future.

But remember every purchase you make is a vote in the mega financial system, and that system is in no small measure running the world.

At a public level you also have choices, many revolving around where your career takes you. Wherever you find yourself in the coming years as doctors, lawyers, investors, politicians, business leaders, you will be confronted with the already unavoidable impacts of a changing climate, and I call upon you to put your weight behind ambitious and responsible solutions, because there are many.

Take this university as a mini-model of a country.

Imagine this entire campus run on unlimited energy harnessed efficiently from the sun, wind and tides, right there! It is possible, you can either make it happen or you can push for it.

Imagine Campus Center and the new Science Complex producing their own energy and learning to maximize student comfort while keeping overhead costs low.

Imagine energy stored personally, freeing you from that mess of cables and chargers, except the cable to plug in your car of course. Either help develop the technology, or as consumers demand that they be developed and put on the market.

Imagine living in a city where buildings are engineered to catch water, grow food, generate electricity, and produce biofuels. It is already happening elsewhere; make it happen here!

Believe it or not, all of these choices, while made at the private and public levels, are actually also choices at the planetary level. What you as a generation buy, what you eat, how you get around, how you choose to exercise your profession and your consumer power, and who you choose to lead you in government...they are all fundamentally planetary choices because the implications ripple so deeply across economies and the social networks that affect change.

Now if that is not enough for you at the planetary level, please do join me and many others who work on these issues from the global policy perspective. There you would be helping to bring 195 completely unique countries together for a common and urgent cause. I do warn you that it is a job with very little sleep, but of course that is a skill at which you excel!

Graduates, no matter which career path you choose, no matter where you live or who you live with, you will live with the reality of a changing climate, with all its social and economic consequences.

If each of you makes the right choices now, you will manage those consequences and enjoy an exciting world of new technologies and boundless possibilities. If we collectively make the right choices now, we increase well-being worldwide. That is the world we want. That is the world to choose.

Class of 2014, as you leave Campus Center Lawn today, may you remember that you have the greatest power of all: the power of choice, which will determine who you are, how you engage with the world, and in fact, what kind of a world you will have. Do not treat this power lightly. Claim your power of choice at all levels: personal, public and planetary.

Many of those choices will be difficult, many of them will require courage, and many of them will call for your higher sense of purpose and determination. But all of them will determine the quality of your life, those around you and those after you.

And by the way, while you are out there on your adventure saving the world, please don't forget to have fun. Above all, choose to laugh at yourself. Believe me, life is much more enjoyable with daily laughs!
