



**Commencement Ceremony
University of California, San Diego
School of International Relations and Pacific Studies
La Jolla, 13 June 2015**

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

Chancellor Pradeep Khosla,
Dean Peter Cowhey,
Distinguished Faculty,
Honored Guests, and
Most Specially, the Graduating Class,

Class of 2015, congratulations! Today you are on top of the world! And well deserved, for the path has not been easy and yet you are here! But before you step forward, I invite you to pause and say thanks to all who have helped you get here.

Today you stand in the frame of a wide open door. It is important to remember that for many years that door has been held open for you.

Take a moment now to say thank you to all the professors you know and even those you don't, thank you to the leadership of the University and of this Graduate School, thank you to those who drive your shuttles, to those who run the Geisel Library and to those who clean up after the Pumpkin and Watermelon Drops. Thank you to everyone at the University of California San Diego, for collectively they have held this door open for you.

Take a moment to say thank you to your parents, your siblings, your grandparents, your spouse, your children, your friends here today, who have all supported you, encouraged you, held you.

And now is the moment to send that text message to those who cannot join you here today but who have also held this door wide open for you. Thank them for what they have done for you, but also thank them because gratitude itself is your most powerful key to embracing the fullness of life.

Dear graduates, you were all born last century, but you are the prime architects of this century. Daunting as the thought may seem, the decisions you and the rest of your generation make over the next 10 to 25 years will define the very nature of the twenty-first century.

You will write the social contract of this century. Contrary to the previous contracts, it will have to address global concerns just as much, or even more so, than national and local concerns. It will have to be a contract enriched by the integration of North and South, East and West, and deeply informed by the interaction between global challenges and national concerns. It will have to be a contract based more on collaboration than on competition. It will have to be a contract guided by the stars of solidarity and equality.

Through your decisions you will also determine the design of the impressive infrastructure of the twenty-first century, infrastructure that is almost unimaginable to us today. It will be built to transform the way we house, feed, employ and transport nine billion people despite growing climate uncertainties.

It will have to be vastly more efficient in its use of energy and water – and no place knows this better than California. It will have to be vastly more resilient to physical impacts than we ever thought would be necessary. That infrastructure will have to be organic at its core, it will have to discover and use the limitless possibilities of nature and it will have to bring human development into harmony with the natural world.

In addition, you and your peers will determine how we measure development in the twenty-first century. Up until now, measurement of progress has been mainly economic, based on GDP, employment ratios and income levels. You yourself may measure your own worth by salary, grant money won or accumulated debt. This new century will require a much more inclusive measure of value.

It will have to include and value both environmental sustainability and social welfare. We have progressed enough to recognize that these two factors are at least as crucial as economic development, but we have not yet developed a sound value metric. Several serious efforts have been made, but they all have shortcomings, and above all, none of them has been mainstreamed into systemic policy decision-making.

Way back in 1968 Robert Kennedy warned us: “Gross national product does not allow for the health of our children, the quality of their education or the joy of their play. It measures neither our wit nor our courage, neither our wisdom nor our learning, neither our compassion nor our devotion to our country, in short it measures everything, except that which makes life worthwhile.” Kennedy’s call cannot continue to go unanswered in the

twenty-first century. My generation has tried its best. We now turn to you, as members of society but also as individuals.

Today, each of you is poised to walk through the door that leads to the next chapter of your life. Just before you do, may I suggest two thoughts to take with you on your journey.

My first thought for your journey: decide to consciously exercise the power to create your own reality. The quality of your life is not determined as much by what happens to you but rather by how you react to what happens.

Today is a very happy occasion. And there will be many more happy occasions in your life, but there will also be many challenges. Life deals us cards, some of joy, some of sorrow, some of open invitations, some of doors that close.

We can seldom influence which card we get and when, but we can always decide what we do with, and how we react to, that card. We often think we are powerless but, in reality, we have the strongest of tools: the power of our attitude, our thoughts, our beliefs. It is precisely in those moments in which we are most tested that it is most urgent to not fall into the default belief of being helpless. I will admit it is not easy to make a different choice in your belief.

A few years ago, I was devastated by an acutely painful betrayal and loss. In the beginning I was in total disbelief, and then I went into anger and despair and was consumed by the paralyzing feeling of having been profoundly wronged. Eventually, with the help of several very wise people, I realized that I had another choice, and I began to build a positive ladder to help me climb out of my deep hole of misery.

I began to realize that I am only a victim of someone else's actions if I allow those actions to determine my day, define my thoughts, or rob me of my smile. I learned that the capacity to create my own reality is one of the most powerful truths of life, but is not one that is learned over night. I am still climbing my ladder, and I do still slip and fall, but every fall is gentler and every conquered rung on the ladder allows me to see a more expansive horizon.

I am still climbing because it is only now, at the ripe old age of 58 that I am learning to create my own reality. I say to you: do not wait that long. Take control of your reality and do it sooner rather than later.

My second thought for your journey: discover the joy in every individual experience in your life, and have the patience to let the full plan unfold gradually.

You probably know already that life has many lanes, bends, and even U-turns. It is not about getting to the ultimate perfect destination right away, it is more about fully appreciating each stop along the way, and knowing that each stop has a lesson to be learned, a skill to be honed. Eventually you will be able to connect the dots, even if those connections are not evident from the start.

Throughout my own journey, I did many things which were frankly quite disjointed, at least so it seemed at the time.

I started off with six years in a German grammar school obliged to learn a language in which I had no roots and exposed to a culture for which I felt no affinity.

In college and graduate school I chose to study anthropology, a window into the vast diversity of cultures around the world. But I only worked as a field anthropologist for a brief period, before moving to the “obvious”: representing my government as a diplomat and delving into international finance issues. Clearly not what my anthropology professors had prepared me for.

After a short period, I moved to direct an international initiative that promoted renewable energy, despite the fact that I had to learn all about clean energy generation and transmission on the job. It was a serious challenge since prior to that, the only fact I knew about electricity is that you get it when you flip the switch.

As life is never boring, I soon decided to start an NGO focused on climate change and invested eight years in deep collaboration with other NGOs and training in consensus-building skills. And, just to not leave any sector out, I finally spent some time in the private sector consulting to major corporations on what they could do to address climate change.

So I speak German, I have government, NGO and corporate experience, I have some knowledge of topics as diverse as diplomacy, consensus building, cultural diversity, energy, finance and climate change...

Do you see any evident linear path? Well.....

Today, I lead the one institution which directly coordinates the efforts of all governments of the world to address climate change.

Our focus is building consensus through multilateral diplomacy, dealing with most cultures of the world, promoting the full spectrum of renewable energy solutions, looking for

financial solutions, collaborating with hundreds of NGOs, encouraging all major and minor corporations to participate, and to top it all off, we are headquartered in Germany!

If I had been asked thirty years ago to identify what specific experiences and skill sets I would need for my wonderful job, I would not have been able to so strategically align one experience after the other, each one providing a critical and necessary facet for the eventual overall package.

So today, as you prepare to leap through that door, learn to fully explore the richness of every chapter of life. No chapter is permanent. Every chapter is unique. And all chapters contribute distinctive colors to the overall palette of life, in ways you will perhaps only recognize and appreciate much later. But that should not stop you from extracting the most out of every chapter; to the contrary, enjoy all the hidden surprises that are in store for you!

Dear graduates, I have shared two stories of personal transformation as thoughts for you as individuals. But I remind you that you are not only individuals, you are part of the larger society, one in the midst of major transformation itself. You have the power to create your own personal reality, but you also have the power – in fact the obligation – to create the society you wish to live in.

This is the Great Work of your generation, and it is yours to embrace. You are thinkers. You are doers. You are innovators. You work hard and you work smart. You aren't just much more connected, you connect much more. We now turn to you not because we are unable to design the future, but because you are more able to.

Here in the shadow of the Geisel Library, it is easy to talk about “the places you'll go” – and you will go many places. But as you do, go with the determination to create the reality you want for yourselves, for your society and for your century.

And the world will be a better place.

To the last ever UCSD-IRPS class: congratulations and happy journey!
