

***BE THE KEEPERS OF THE LIGHT***

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President Frenk, members of the faculty, distinguished graduates, honored guests, my friends:

There is a story about a man who gives a coin to each of his three sons. The one who can use that single coin to buy something to fill up a room in their home will inherit the family fortune. The boys spend the day out at the market and return after nightfall to their darkened home. One son is dragging bales of hay, but it is not enough to reach the ceiling. The next son is carrying bags full of feathers, but he falls short as well. The third son appears to be empty-handed, until he takes a match and a candle out of his pocket. Before his father's satisfied eyes, he easily fills the room with light.

I stand here today in the great city of Miami looking out at some of the world's best and brightest. Those of you who are receiving your undergraduate degree today are becoming part of a highly privileged and powerful minority on this planet: university graduates. Those receiving advanced degrees have already experienced the tremendous opportunity and responsibility that comes with being a part of that group. You have achieved something extraordinary – something that none of us achieves alone. Whether our families support our education, or we work our own way through school; whether we draw our inspiration from classmates or from beloved professors; no matter what, all of us who have been educated have been given a gift. To be more specific, I would like you to imagine that the University of Miami, along with everyone who supported you along the way, is giving you not only a diploma today, but also a coin, just like the father in the story. This is no ordinary coin. It is a coin that represents the knowledge and skill you have obtained. A coin with which you will buy your future.

Imagine, for a moment, that you can feel this coin in your hand right now. It is heavy in your palm, because it carries with it all of the hard work that has brought you to this point. It is also crying out to be spent. You, and you alone, will choose how you use it. You, and you alone, will choose what you purchase. You will use it to make the most important investment any of us makes in our lifetimes: the investment of time and energy and intelligence that determines what our impact on the world will be. No purchase is more critical.

So, University of Miami Class of 2016: What will you spend it on?

Many years ago now, I stood where you stand today, holding a coin in my hand, deciding how to spend it. I chose to invest it in a lifetime of public service. And let me tell you: after many decades in national and international politics, I have seen people invest their time wisely – and I have seen people invest their time foolishly.

One of the most challenging periods of my life provides a good example. When I became president of my country for the first time, Costa Rica was surrounded by conflict and war. The rest of the world, especially the United States, had plenty of opinions about how to fill the void that our struggling region was experiencing. Let's just say that I saw

leaders buy a lot of hay, and a lot of feathers. Nothing worked. I believed that Central America would only solve its problems if Central Americans proposed the answer. I drafted a Peace Plan and set out to make it a reality. However, it faced tremendous opposition, both within our region, and around the world.

What I found during those years was that the solution was simple. Not easy, but simple. The solution was to find the people who can light up the room. The solution was to find the people who were willing, as I was, to go to as many places, to shake as many hands, to give as many speeches, to hold as many meetings as we needed to, in order to reach our goal. I learned to look for people who are thoughtful about how they invest their time and energy. I learned to look for people who go out on a limb for the right course of action, even when that course of action is not popular.

Those are the people who create change. When you find them, you know that together, you are striking every match in the box, even when the night is cold and damp, without a star in the sky.

I urge you to do the same: to be creative in the way you spend your precious resources. To be like the son who bought a match and a candle, rather than going for obvious and less effective solutions. And to look for others who share your willingness to see the big picture, and then work hard on any level necessary, whether you are shaping global policy or your own neighborhood.

I urge you to do this, not just for your sake, but for the world's sake, because this planet needs each and every one of you to achieve the greatest positive impact you possibly can. It is no exaggeration to say that the world is depending on you – and it is a world in crisis.

During the past decade, we have heard the word “crisis” in many contexts: the global financial crisis whose repercussions have afflicted so many countries and families all over the world, and the refugee crisis that has too often showcased the worst elements of human nature and the limitations of our international community. However, I use the word “crisis” in a somewhat broader sense. For I say that we had a world in crisis long before either of these phenomena occurred. I say that our true economic crisis is the fact that 663 million people in our world have no access to clean water, and more than 800 million live in substandard housing. I say that it is a spiritual crisis when – as Gandhi said – some people are so poor that they can only see God in the form of bread, while others of us have the means to end their suffering. I say that it is a moral crisis when 17,000 children die each day from hunger-related causes. I say that it is a humanitarian crisis when 2.8 billion people live on an income of less than two dollars per day, and in their unrelenting poverty are totally excluded from public decision-making. And I say it is a democratic crisis in the United States when xenophobia and prejudice reach the mainstream of political discourse.

And why are these crises occurring? The truth is that, just as you now have all the skills and qualifications you need to make a difference in the world, our global community has everything it needs to put an end to these problems. We have everything we need to turn our status quo of suffering and inequality, into a thing of the past. The most pressing problems of our age require not more money, or more time, or more insight, but simply leaders who are willing to consider a new way of doing things. John F. Kennedy's inaugural address famously stated that *“man holds in his mortal hands the power to abolish all forms of human poverty and all forms of human life.”* If that was true in 1961, it is certainly true today. Now, more than ever before, we have the resources and the knowledge to feed the hungry, end preventable disease, and educate our children.

We are simply making bad choices about how to spend time, money and power. We are investing too much of our money in our militaries instead of in our schools. We are investing too much of our scientific genius in nuclear weapons instead of in vaccines. We are investing too many of our words in hateful bombast and racism instead of in reason and understanding.

You have great power to change this. You carry away with you today the strength of a great university and a great city of tremendous diversity. These are times of upheaval and danger, but also of unprecedented possibility. You are the leaders who will determine whether, little by little, we change our course and find a better way.

Members of the Class of 2016,

One of your fellow University of Miami graduates, the poet Donald Justice, wrote: *"The world is very dusty, uncle. Let us work. One day the sickness shall pass from the earth for good. The orchard will bloom; someone will play the guitar. Our work will be seen as strong and clean and good. And all that we suffered through having existed, shall be forgotten as though it had never existed."*

You who throw your caps in the air today are headed out into a dusty world. There is suffering and sickness nearly everywhere we look. But the poet is right: Let us work. Let us spend our educations wisely. Let us be creative. Let us think before we act, but then act with tireless energy.

In a world in which too many try to fill up their lives with hay and feathers, be the keepers of the light. Be the seekers of innovation. And most of all, recognize and support each other when you meet along the path: because it is by working together that you will truly make a stand against the darkness.

As you start this new phase of your lives, may you never be afraid to use the voice you have earned. May you always remember that change is possible. May you stand up against those who say that it is unrealistic to resist the poverty, inequality, illiteracy and disease we continue to allow upon our planet. May you recognize the power you hold in your hands to create a world different from the one you have always known.

In doing so, you will reach the end of your days knowing that you have truly lived - for you will leave behind a world of greater dignity, equality, and peace.

Congratulations, and Godspeed.