

**University of Miami Commencement**  
**Friday, May 12, 2017**

Thank you, [name], for the warm introduction.

Congratulations to the University of Miami Class of 2017! It is an honor to be invited by my good friend, and your President, Julio Frenk to join you for this milestone.

Graduates, you have made it through long nights of studying, early morning classes, and maybe a party or two. Now you should be able to enjoy this ceremony, so I have planned for my remarks to be brief!

Commencement exercises are one of the rare moments in society dedicated to sharing some wisdom.

My first words of advice to you are to thank your friends, families, mentors, and loved ones for their support, for helping you become what you are today.

I want to share four lessons from my own journey that may be an inspiration along yours...because we need bright, engaged young people like you to lead today for a better tomorrow.

**My first lesson is to stay open to opportunities that may not be in your original plan.**

I began my career working as a physician and Harvard educated public health specialist, work I was passionate about.

At the age of 35, I was asked by the Prime Minister to enter the Government of Norway. This came as a complete surprise. I had no such plans or ambitions. The fact that the role was to become Minister of the Environment, not Minister of Health and Social Affairs, added an additional challenge.

Instead of being fearful of a new area that I now needed to delve into, I quickly was relieved to find that the knowledge and principles I had already gained from my studies and working life were indeed perfectly relevant.

They even brought new thinking to the work of my ministry, as the global burden of environmental degradation and unsustainable patterns of development became of great concern to me, also as a public health issue.

This whole experience sparked a realization in me that we need many more professionals, analysts, decision-makers, and political leaders with knowledge and experience that cross traditional borders, both across academic disciplines, different professions, and sectors of society.

On reflection, maybe these broad perspectives in my own thinking contributed to the fact that half a year after my sudden introduction to the political arena, I found myself elected to become deputy leader of my party, and only six years later as Prime Minister and Party Leader?

I mention this to illustrate that in our lives we will be confronted with new challenges and choices. Instead of holding on to rigid notions of what you *should* do with your life, ask yourself, if faced with a new opportunity: *can* I do it?

At such key crossroads in life, what really counts is to find out: Do I have something to contribute? Can I make a difference?

**My second lesson is to look for connections...between issues, between sectors, and between people.** You will quickly find that everyone and everything is connected, and that your work and impact will be stronger when you think holistically.

Once in so-called “question time” in Parliament, after an intense exchange with an opposition leader, I remember exclaiming: “Yes, everything is indeed linked to everything else.”

At the time, nearly 20 years ago this was immediately criticized, even ridiculed by some, for being simply evasive and unclear.

Interestingly, today it is often being quoted with great respect, even with admiration!

When I led the World Health Organization, I saw the connectedness of the world, where a disease outbreak in one country can disregard borders and board an airplane to another.

Through three decades of work on sustainable development, starting when I led the UN’s “World Commission on Environment and Development,” I have seen the linkages between people and the planet.

For example, how we use energy impacts the air we breathe.

How we treat women *in* society impacts the health *of* society.

Whether we make quality education and health care available to a privileged few or to all impacts whether our economies grow or stall.

And whether we respect human rights impacts the stability of countries, and indeed, the world.

As you begin your careers, don’t write off problems as out of your realm; contemplate how your skills and expertise can make a difference across social, economic, and environmental challenges.

**My third lesson is to be willing to try new solutions, but base them in evidence.** Build on and strengthen the evidence, share the evidence, and act upon the evidence.

Recent events and experiences, not least here in the US, makes this message even more fundamental.

You need to seek knowledge and evidence to secure the necessary basis for giving directions and making decisions. This is the only workable and realistic basis for relevant and effective action, given that we are obliged to pursue common responsibilities, in a closely connected and interdependent world.

Years of gaining experience in how to act and get results, as Minister of the Environment, as Prime Minister, and as Director-General of the World Health Organization, has convinced me of moving ahead, based on evidence, programs, and policies that can be tested, measuring results and performance.

Yet, the evidence base alone is often not enough to achieve breakthroughs to reach our goals. New ideas often meet old resistance. Choosing to move the agenda forward even against considerable opposition is a critical component of leadership. Determination, even courage, should not be underestimated.

As graduates of a premier research university, you have the skills to gather and use evidence to create innovative and effective solutions. Be bold in standing by your ideas.

**My final lesson for today is to focus on your impact, not your job title.**

What has motivated me throughout my career is the good I could do, not the resume I could build. When you begin your career, many people will focus on climbing the ladder. Yet you will quickly find that what will sustain you, in good times and bad, is working on causes you care about.

As I look back on life, what stands out to me is the inspiring people I've worked with and the progress we've made on the issues that matter – sustainable development, quality health care, gender equality, and climate change.

Graduates of the Class of 2017, the world needs your leadership.

You have received an education from a top university – a privilege most young people will never enjoy. How will you use this privilege to create change?

Our world is at a crossroad: One path leads toward greater and greater inequality, where children continue to be born into poverty and are denied opportunity.

Another path leads toward a world where no one is left behind...where every person has the chance to seize the wonders of our world.

Graduates, we need you to put us on the path toward equality. You are the largest youth generation in history. You are also the most globally connected and aware. Use your education, skills, and talents to find solutions that will open doors for everyone.

I promise this will be more fulfilling than any title on a business card.

I had the honor of working with the late Nelson Mandela, one of my heroes, as part of a group he established called The Elders.

I will end with a quote from him that encapsulates what this ceremony is all about. Mandela said, "What counts in life is not the mere fact that we have lived. It is what difference we have made to the lives of others that will determine the significance of the life we lead."

Graduates, my warm congratulations!

Enjoy this moment, and go change the world!