

Welcome everybody. What an honor it is for me to be here, and to address all of you.

You deserve this celebration—this moment, after your long wait.

And—I think the wisest, most succinct words for today come from that preeminent American philosopher—

—Lizzo.

It's about damn time.

Congratulations.

It speaks to the power of this place, and your connection to it and your classmates that you came back.

I myself found it so hard to leave SIPA it took me two tries; in so many ways, this institution changed life.

My education wasn't interrupted by a pandemic—I actually chose to leave in the middle of my studies in 1989 because of a different sort of upheaval.

I was just a few courses away from my degree, barely one semester, but Gorbachev and Perestroika and the seismic change unfolding in the Soviet Union beckoned.

I had managed to wangle an

internship at CNN's newly formed Moscow bureau—and I swore to my advisor I'd only stay over there for a semester.

One thing led to another—an internship became a producer job became a reporting job—and I was there for 5 years, watching something I never thought I'd see—the collapse of the Soviet Union and of communism in Eastern Europe.

And how well prepared I was, thanks to SIPA—ready to understand what was happening, and put it in context for the world.

Of course, everything I'd learned about the Soviet Union, the history of Russia, politics, the language—that was all invaluable.

But— and I'm sure you are all already feeling this out in the world—

What was essential was also the framework I learned here—a way of examining the world order—an ability to ask analytical questions about critical social and political issues, to hunt for clues. And of course the broad take SIPA affords, what I'd learned from the vastly different views and experiences of my classmates.

Those things had helped to mold me into someone ready for almost any challenge.

Luckily.

Oh—I made plenty of mistakes. Embarrassing ones. Staring stone cold frozen and frightened into a live camera, unable to remember what I was going to say about the Soviet election. That kind of thing.

But I usually had a sense I could figure things out.

In particular I remember how Professor Charles Gati had helped me understand the double speak of official soviet language, how to read the critical nuance from even a slight shift in bureaucratic tone. And also to dig beneath the words, look for actions instead. What the shops were and weren't stocking. Which cities might be suddenly off-limits.

Professor Mark von Hagen helped me understand the original idealism of 1917 and the Russian revolution, and why, despite the brutal totalitarianism we saw from the west, the Russian people often had different feelings about their government. I had a better sense of the deep, centuries old, almost mystical Russian pride harnessed by Bolshevism—and today so expertly by Vladimir Putin.

But perhaps what I most remember is the advice I got from then head of the Harriman institute, Robert Legvold, who was candidly torn about the “semester” I'd be taking off. “I worry you won't come back to finish—promise you will come back,” he said to me.

Well—I did—5 years later. I think I surprised him. But I never thought I wouldn't be back. That speaks to the value of this place. By then I was a full time reporter at CNN, about to cover the White house, and it wasn't a credential I HAD to have at that point—and honestly my employer was slightly annoyed. But I knew the currency of a SIPA degree in the broader world, and I also knew, after what I'd seen and experienced in the world, that my final semester could still be extraordinarily helpful. And it was—boosting my confidence—setting me up for a turn in my career to covering issues like politics, the economy, and women's leadership and power.

We, YOU, as SIPA graduates, are problem solvers for the world.

I think that's really what this degree does for us. And you are connectors. Whether focusing on public policy, international affairs, whether at corporations, in governments or nonprofits, specializing in energy policy or economics. SIPA sets us up to solve, understand, connect—to draw the world closer together.

And here's what's incredible about all of you. You've already met the type of challenges most of us meet only years after graduating.

We, on the board of trustees, know what a struggle it was to learn during a pandemic—just to survive and stay sane during a pandemic frankly

But as Merit and Tom noted, and as I've heard from so many—you dove in and created during those years—tried to help, tried to find solutions, helped the school to innovate. You decided to persevere, and to get that degree.

You have been on the frontlines of the biggest challenges the world has had in decades, even a century.

I know. Lucky you. I realize it's not the kind of education anyone would pick.

But I do hope you give yourselves credit for that accomplishment.

You rose to that challenge, and the fact that you are here today shows handle anything.

Again, Luckily.

Because this continues to be a moment of unprecedented change and challenge, here and abroad, well beyond the pandemic.

I saw a headline recently that made me ponder the parallels between my immediate post-SIPA experience and yours, today.

I remember one of my first stories on air for CNN in Moscow, perhaps my very first—the opening of the Moscow McDonalds. It seemed to herald such optimistic change.

I saw a few days ago that McDonalds is closing shop for now in Russia.

Those seem sobering bookends to an era—our hopeful and then disdainful judgment conveyed with those oh so American golden arches.

BUT.

Let me say something else about these times. Times of great transition, even when the trends seem frightening or worrisome, are also windows of enormous opportunity. Both for you personally, and as agents of change.

The world may look foreboding, but it's a juncture when leaders, thinkers and doers can step into the breach, when deep transformation is possible for those who dig in, because there *is* so much in flux, because there *is* plasticity.

It's also not entirely unlike the moment in history, in 1946, when this school was founded, in order to create leaders who could tackle complex problems. Lee Bollinger talks extensively about Columbia's 4th purpose,

and has pushed the university to make good on that, to serve the greater good. SIPA has always done that. It's been baked in to our mission.

In short, the world needs you, your vision, your problem-solving skills, your optimistic spirit. You've already served as our role models for your weathering of the pandemic. We have full confidence in your capabilities as you move forward.

You are already out in the world, and so don't necessarily need the typical commencement advice. And, no doubt, given all you've been through, I could be learning from you. Still, let me offer just a few observations about things that have helped me in life:

LISTEN. There's not enough of that going on, and it's a skill I learned and honed at Columbia. There is still so much worth listening to. And less talk, and more listening and thinking, might be a balm for our current condition. Listen to employers, friends, enemies. Suspend judgment and think.

(I can't tell you how often I, as a young reporter on beats largely male dominated, was told to talk more, to interrupt, to be louder. But my superpower has always been listening. It took me a while to sort that out.)

And to that end—

EMBRACE AUTHENTICITY. All of us have quite unique talents to offer. Many skills are learned, and many we share in common. But when you can operate in your zone of authenticity, trusting your instincts, and in what might make you unique, you'll make your best contribution and likely be happiest.

RISK. Early and often. I wish I had done more of that honestly. A devout perfectionist, I didn't understand that failure is learning. It seemed far too frightening to me. One of our distinguished honorary degree recipients this year, the revolutionary South African artist William Kentridge, says he likes to think of his studio as a safe space for stupidity.

Find that zone for yourself. Test things that seem naive or even stupid. It may be our only way forward at this point, and might yield more than cynical inaction.

Finally—REMAIN CONNECTED.

You clearly already understand this one, because you made the effort to come back today. But the power of your ties and connections are only just beginning. What you have here as a collective—and the ties with friends and classmates—those are powerful multipliers for you personally and professionally. They will inspire, motivate, create change, and bring joy. I'm an introvert, and I'm busy, and easily overwhelmed. I know how hard it can be to maintain those bonds. But don't neglect them.

You all here share something very powerful. A common understanding. Already, by choosing to come here, to get this degree, you are declaring—I want to make a difference in the world. It's an incredible thing, to do that as a community.

I would like to close with more inspiration—not from Lizzo, this time, but from our new poet laureate.

Poetry is, at times, the only way to make sense of the world.

I had to laugh recently when I read one Ukrainian writer's unique and enlightened plea for aid from the outside world:

“Putins come and go,” he said. “If you want to help, send us some poems.”

Well.

This one is courtesy of Joy Harjo, our new poet laureate, the first Native American to have that distinction.

I hope it will boost the launch you've already undertaken, and allow you to focus on the parting of clouds rather than the clouds themselves.

Once the world was perfect

Once the world was perfect, and we were happy in that world.

Then we took it for granted.

Discontent began a small rumble in the earthly mind.

Then Doubt pushed through with its spiked head.

And once Doubt ruptured the web,

All manner of demon thoughts

Jumped through—

We destroyed the world we had been given

For inspiration, for life—

Each stone of jealousy, each stone

Of fear, greed, envy, and hatred, put out the light.

No one was without a stone in his or her hand.

There we were,

Right back where we had started.

We were bumping into each other
In the dark.
And now we had no place to live, since we didn't know
How to live with each other.
Then one of the stumbling ones took pity on another
And shared a blanket.
A spark of kindness made a light.
The light made an opening in the darkness.
Everyone worked together to make a ladder.
A Wind Clan person climbed out first into the next world,
And then the other clans, the children of those clans, their children,
And their children, all the way through time—
To now, into this morning light to
you.

—

It's afternoon light at the moment.

But, still.

Thank you—for being the generation busy building those ladders, and
shining your lights.

And best of luck.