



**Commencement speech at the Nicholas School of the Environment  
at Duke University  
Durham, North Carolina, 14 May 2011**

**By Christiana Figueres, Executive Secretary  
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Dear graduates, distinguished faculty, families and friends,

Let me begin with two confessions: First, I must tell you that this is my first commencement speech. So I thank you for granting me the honour of being a part of your recognition ceremony. However, if in the end you decide it should also be my last commencement speech, please just tell me quietly today or drop me a line. I'll take it very much to heart and spare the next school which might have the bad idea of inviting me!

Second, you are already far ahead of me. When I went to graduate school, environmental studies were in their infancy, at best. And it never even occurred to me to focus on the environment. As a young anthropologist interested in bringing about change at the community level, I never suspected that I would eventually dedicate my life to the challenges of the changing global environment. So you are already a step ahead at this stage, because by coming to the Nicholas School of Environment I assume you have already decided to dedicate at least part of your life to issues of the environment, and you are fortunate to have selected one of the best schools in the world to prepare you for that.

A good grad school comes at a price – and no, I don't just mean the tuition. I also refer to the solid deficit of sleep, the carpal tunnel pains, the highly caffeinated and sugar-intensive nutrition, swallowed down with Red Bull, and of course, many heated debates which may have left a frustrated taste of disagreement with fellow students and professors.

But I trust your pains were more than compensated by deep experiences of discovering knowledge, discovering friends, and above all, discovering yourself. I am sure you have been collecting your good share of heart warming memories that you will never forget. And now today, perhaps you are thinking that you are finally at the glorious end of this journey. Right! Bask in your glory! Take it in! But as you do, recognize the best news of all: it is actually another beginning, a beginning of a new journey, perhaps an even more exciting one!

All right – you'll tell me that's exactly what they told you when you graduated from kindergarden, and high school, and college, and your first graduate degree. And that may have been true at each of those stages. But what I know is that this particular beginning is momentous: not only because of what it means to you; but perhaps more importantly because of what you can now bring to the world.

Never before has a healthy natural environment, as the very basis of human life, been a more daunting challenge to humanity. Never before have environmental challenges been in greater or more urgent need of pattern-breaking, paradigm-shifting solutions, from climate change, to biodiversity to

desertification. And as you leave Hug Commons, you are called upon to find solutions to those challenges, locally, nationally or globally, at whatever level you choose because they are all intricately interrelated.

Graduates, with your prestigious degrees, you have become part of one of the world's most elite minority groups because:

- You don't need to fetch water from a polluted river in order to drink while worrying that the contamination will affect your health.
- You don't need to tend your fields by hand in order to eat while fretting that changing weather patterns are ruining your meagre survival crop.
- Nor do you need to gather firewood every day in order to cook, while worrying that inhaling the smoke will affect your lungs. (No, I am not referring to any inhaling behaviours on campus).

While you may take all this for granted, it is a privilege Your basic needs are more than covered, leaving your minds free to explore unknown territories with dedication and creativity in order to discover and shape solutions for a safer world.

Pardon me if I sound old fashioned, but in my book, the privilege of your degrees imposes the moral obligation to navigate the world with the purpose of crafting solutions to the great challenges that beset humankind. As you know, some of the most daunting challenges were created in the past, long before you were born. Today they must be addressed by your sharp minds because otherwise they will threaten the well-being of generations yet unborn.

So, after this exhortation to merely step up and save the world, the last thing you want, or need, is a step-by-step guide on how to best navigate that world. Well, you can relax: even if I were tempted to do so, I could not give you such a guide, because ultimately, everybody has to find their own best way of navigating, and I know each of you has a personal in-built GPS system that has gotten you this far and will continue to guide you. But what I can do is share some of my experiences, wrapped up in two nuggets of advice.

First, do not expect to have the full map visible to you when you start this journey.

As I look back I realize that over my working life I was thrown into a wide diversity of situations that at the time did not seem to follow any clear path, nor have any relation to one another. Today I know better: each of these experiences gave me some insight that is now fundamental to do my job at the helm of the Climate Change Secretariat.

A few examples will suffice.

In order to keep myself from rusting during my stay-at-home-mom years, I studied organizational design and development, without knowing that decades later one of my challenges at the climate secretariat would be to lead a restructuring of the organization.

I am not sure if anything other than being a Latin American qualified me for a job in the US promoting renewable energy technologies in Latin America, but during those years, I learned about the types of energy that we have to deploy today if we are to combat climate change.

I served my government in various capacities, later founded and lead a non governmental organization, and then consulted to various corporations, without realizing that supporting the climate change negotiations would require building bridges among governments, corporations and NGOs, and that you cannot do that effectively if you have not experienced each from the inside.

To cap it all, as a child I went to a German grammar school. My mother, who is here today, thought she was doing the best thing for us, (you know - strict German discipline and all those good things.) But my brother and I couldn't stand the place, so much so, that the night we left we vowed to each other that we would forever erase from our memories the entire German language and anything remotely to do with the culture - a surprisingly easy job which we successfully completed by the next morning. Fifteen years later I chose to work in Germany, I later married a wonderful German man, and my dream job eventually took me to live in Bonn, Germany.

So you don't need to have absolute clarity about every pebble along life's path at the age of 24, 28, or even 54. Rather, the trail unfolds as you embark upon it with commitment.

Every time I moved to a new job, I did so because I felt committed and decided to learn all I possibly could.

Every time I learned something new and applied it, I contributed back to the world.

Every time I contributed something back to the world, I edged closer to discovering my life's purpose.

Now I will admit that once I had discovered my purpose, I dedicated myself completely to addressing climate change and eventually even had the nerve to compete for the top job in the business, despite international competition.

But then, early one Saturday morning exactly a year ago, before breakfast, I received a call from the Secretary General of the United Nations saying "I have chosen you to be the next Executive Secretary of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change". Trust me: it took me a while to digest that phone call, and only then did it become clear to me that every job that I had done and every experience I had gathered had provided me with knowledge and skills that I now absolutely needed. My personal future and the world's future had finally converged.

So again, do not expect to have the full map visible to you, just dive in, with commitment. Don't wait around until you feel you have it fully figured out: life is too exciting and too rich with opportunities. Jump in, even if the water is cold.

My second nugget of advice is this: In your life's navigation system, punch in 'PASSION' as your North, not convenience, not practicality, those are easier, but they don't get you very far, and for sure, not very deep.

The philosophers of the ancient world said that when a person's mind is most intently focussed on any work because of its passion for that work, the mind is joined with the mind of the stars.<sup>1</sup> The ancients were right. It all begins and ends with passion.

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<sup>1</sup> Ancient Arabian philosophy quoted by Henry Cornelius Agrippa

Even though I did not have clarity about my life's ultimate purpose, I stayed committed, not least to myself. Without knowing exactly where my journey would eventually take me, this commitment gave me direction. Without that commitment, I would not have seen or taken the learning opportunities that my life and my jobs offered. And without that commitment, my ideas about a better future would gradually have blown away like footprints in loose sand.

What kept me committed? The answer is simple: passion.

- Passion for making the world a bit better around me
- Passion for the future, particularly once I had become a mother
- Passion for climate change, the subject matter to which I have now dedicated my life

My greatest hope for you is that you find, feel and follow your passion - whatever it may be - because:

- Passion is what makes life blossom far beyond the pure mechanics of living it.
- Passion is what will enable you to reach for the stars in your work.
- Passion is what will make your life and your work virtuous – for the benefit of the world.
- And most importantly, passion is the most crucial ingredient for staying true to yourself. You cannot fool yourself into being passionate about something, so don't even try!

But a word of warning: you must ensure that passion does not lead to intolerance. Learn to distinguish between passion and position: Be true to your passion. Be flexible on your position, and above all be respectful of others' positions. Com-passion is a close relative of passion - the humanity of the other cannot be compromised. Never let your passion become an excuse for belittling or destroying someone else.

I want to close before I get passionately philosophical, but I don't want to close without addressing the other two important groups sitting here today: your faculty, and your parents.

Faculty, those of us who labour in the various fields of the natural environment thank you for your daily dedication to these young people. You have guided them, you have inspired them. Even more importantly, you have encouraged them to question and challenge you. The important work they will do in the future is your well deserved reward.

Parents, I have one daughter graduating on the other side of the campus later on today, and another daughter graduating on the other side of the country next month. So in all humility I join you in your tears of joy. The poetic wisdom of Kahlil Gibran has been very meaningful to me over the years and I hope it may ring true for you, too:

*"Your children are not your children.  
[...]*

*You may give them your love but not your thoughts,  
For they have their own thoughts.  
You may house their bodies but not their souls,  
For their souls dwell in the house of tomorrow,  
[...]*

*You may strive to be like them,  
but seek not to make them like you.”*

Fellow parents, our common challenge is to rejoice as our sons and daughters take off in flight, committing ourselves to humbly learn from them.

And I have a few final words for the graduates. I have urged you to explore the vast territory before you, to be committed and to be passionate. Do your life’s work because you love it - not because somebody has told you to do it. But do not dare do it without having lots of fun, in particular without laughing at yourself at least once a week, if not once a day.

Always believe in yourself and in your abilities. You do not have too little of this, or too much of that or not enough of the other. You are perfect the way you are with your own unique abilities. But that is no excuse for not getting an up to date map, or at least a partner who can read maps.

Enjoy the journey and God bless!

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