Thank you for this opportunity and many thanks to everyone here, including our faculty, staff, administration, and the Board of Trustees. I feel very honored and privileged to be here today. Before I begin, let’s all give a very special thanks to President Vaughn, who’s retiring at the end of the academic year.

When he began leading our university as our president in 1995, we were struggling financially with low enrollments. By 2007, when I arrived, we already had numerous transformations. We should all applaud the tireless work from President Vaughn and his wife Renee in their daily dedications to our busy, bustling, and beautiful campus and over 11,000 capable and energetic students. I love UT!

Today we’re here to celebrate YOUR academic victories as the Class of 2023. You’ve made it! Congratulations, graduates!

You’re well positioned to capitalize on your newly cultivated skill sets to steer society through its turbulent waters. We’re living in challenging times amidst political, technological, and economic disruptions. Wars and more wars. We are counting on you to take the helm and navigate -- as you were made for such a time as this.

To quote one of my favorite actors, Jim Caviezel: “You weren’t made to fit in. You were born to stand out.” You’ve already battled and overcome the pandemic and hurricanes Ian and Idalia. Keep persevering and succeeding in everything you do.

There are hundreds of tips I could offer to help you in your future, but I’ll offer just four.

**1. Work hard, take on challenges, and don’t fear failure.**

Your work ethic and attitude matter. My dad never said he *had* to go to work. He said he *gets* to go to work. And he worked “half days,” which were 12-hour days. Long days fly by when you’re doing what you love and what you’re passionate about. So before embarking on the next phase of your life, thoughtfully consider your strengths and passions and match your job accordingly. You’ll never stop loving what you do.

When I first became the College of Business associate dean in 2011, I was an untenured assistant professor. A prior associate dean’s husband called me crazy for my risky leap of faith and its potential for failure. In one way, he was right – I may have seemed a little crazy. But I knew Dean Ghannadian and our faculty have always been very fair. Thank you, Dean Ghannadian and faculty. I’ve been blessed to work with so many great people. I’ve had some successes and some failures and know that both can help us grow, so don’t fear failure. As one of our UT coaches Barry Foster says, “headwinds make us stronger.”

**2. Focus on people over things.**

People matter. Relationships matter. Families matter. We only have a short time in this world to make a difference for others – just the “dash” between the years on our tombstones – so we need to live accordingly. Relationships are much more important than making money and accumulating things. Money and things can’t hug and love us back. People love us back. Life is too short to hold grudges. Forgive your friends and your foes. Forgiveness matters.

**3. Express gratitude daily.**

Gratitude matters. Prior to moving to Tampa in 2007, my husband and I thought our two sons might one day attend a large state university in Florida. I had attended three: USF, FAU, and FSU. But it didn’t take long for us to realize the outstanding opportunities that UT offers. UT’s holistic and multi-pronged approach to enhance students’ physical, spiritual, and mental well-being is second to none. My oldest son Jack just spent his first semester here in Jenkins Hall as an entrepreneurship major and member of the Entrepreneurship Club. He’s met quite a few friends and loves the UT experience. Our family greatly appreciates all that UT has done. Thank you again, President Vaughn, our Board of Trustees, Provost Stern, Dean Ghannadian, and everyone else who’s contributed to UT’s cause!

Everyone here tonight has an interest in you and your success. So thank your families, loved ones, friends, professors, administrators, and staff. But most importantly, thank God today and every day, whether from the pits or the pedestals.

**4. Live for others in sacrifice and build your foundation upon the truth.**

Truth matters. Sometimes it’s risky to seek and speak truth to power. Sometimes our world peddles lies. We need to tell the truth anyway, no matter what our world dictates. Our most memorable and admirable world heroes through the centuries have stood up to the lies, even sacrificing everything they had.

One of my favorites is Max Kolbe. When Max was a child near Warsaw in the early 1900s, he had a vision where Mother Mary asked him to choose between a white crown of purity and a red crown of the ultimate sacrifice. He chose both: purity and the ultimate sacrifice. He became a Catholic priest who founded monasteries near Warsaw (Poland) and Nagasaki (Japan).

In the 1930s, he heard about Hitler’s plans for a “final solution,” which led to a choice: He could stay quiet to try to protect his own life -- as some of his contemporaries chose, or he could speak truth to power. He chose to speak truth to power.

He bought a printing press and started publishing a daily newspaper and began broadcasting on the radio to strongly condemn Nazi persecutions. Many people in Europe and Japan heard his broadcasts and read his newspapers, including the Nazis. In 1941, they arrested him and sent him to Auschwitz, where he became a beacon of light and hope for other prisoners.

A few months later, when the Nazis decided that one of his fellow prisoners needed to die as retribution for another prisoner’s escape, Max Kolbe stepped in and took that prisoner’s place. He spoke truth to power and laid down his life for another. There is no greater love.

I didn’t tell you that story because I necessarily think you’ll one day be in a similar situation. I told you that story because we live in a world where we don’t know what tomorrow will bring, but we do share a certain want for purpose, meaning, love, and the truth.

So “how then, shall we live?”

I see three doors: (1) we could live as nihilists, with the attitude that we should “eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we shall die.” Nothing matters. Or (2) we could live for ourselves with a “What’s in it for me?” attitude. Only I matter. Or (3) we could live by truth and make sacrifices in our lives for the betterment of those around us. Others matter. Together, we all matter.

The only way our world can survive and we can thrive is to opt for door number 3. We live in uncertain and disruptive times, but we “were born for such a time as this.”

**Conclusion**

Look around the room. We’re surrounded by tremendous human potential that goes far beyond what we may even be able to envision. Let’s work together to make this world a greater place than we found it, recognizing that each and every person around us has intrinsic value and dignity. United, we stand. Divided, we fall.

May God bless you.