

Thank you, President Roosevelt, for that wonderful introduction. Congratulations, graduates. You have completed one of the toughest, most rigorous academic programs out there. Freshman Greek almost slayed me. Newton gave me some very long nights at the chalkboard. And don't even get me started on Lobachevsky. Congratulations, Graduate Institute graduates, who have grappled with some of our most timeless questions. Congratulations, parents. You did it! You should be bursting with pride that your kids made it through this intellectual gauntlet. And I am here to tell you: they will find jobs, despite the seeming impracticality of their education. Trust me: the world needs free people, made from books and a balance, more than ever.

And a special thanks to my father, John Polgreen, who joined one of the earliest classes here at St. John's Santa Fe. While he ended up transferring before completing his degree, his love of St. John's was so profound he persuaded not one but two of his children to attend the college. Thanks, Dad, for making the trip out to be here today.

It's extraordinarily humbling to be standing here before you all. It was 22 years ago that I was in a cap and gown, under the Liberty Tree in Annapolis – as the kids say: RIP Liberty Tree – accepting my Bachelor of Arts from this marvelous, singular institution. My head was stuffed with ideas. I wrote my senior essay on Marx and Hegel – lofty stuff indeed. But I had no idea what to do with my life.

Freud said there are only two things that matter in life. Work and love. I lucked out in the love department, meeting my wonderful wife, Candace, at St. John's. We started dating in my senior year, and have been together ever since. I'm so glad she's here with me today. Her love and support have been the bedrock of a happy life.

And I was pretty lucky in the work department too: after a dull, interminable year working at a law office, I chanced into an unpaid internship at a magazine in Washington. I had student loans and rent to pay, so I worked for free doing journalism all day, and waited tables at a Malaysian restaurant at night. I loved the work so much. I knew I had found my purpose. It was tough, but nothing worth doing is easy.

Though, looking back, I can see that I was always meant to be a journalist.

Breaking news has been a big part of my life from an early age. I witnessed my first big news event when I was six: a violent attempted coup in Kenya. The second was in my high school years, in Ghana, where I had a front row seat to the transition from military rule to democracy. Jerry Rawlings, the military dictator who had ruled Ghana since the late '70s, took off his uniform and ran for office in a genuinely free and fair election. To a young teenager, these were momentous, historic events. They shaped how I viewed the world, the nature of citizenship, my sense of what is possible and how individuals can change the world.

These early acts of witness formed a huge part of my desire to be a journalist, to watch events unfold, to try to understand them and make them understandable to others.

As a kid, and I know you will all relate to this, having read all the books of the program, I was constantly asking: why? Why did people have to pay bribes to get an apartment in a government-owned building? Why couldn't our Kenyan and Ghanaian neighbors come to the United States as easily as we could visit their countries? I always wanted to know what was really going on. I wanted to explore and investigate the world around me.

Journalism was the obvious, perhaps only, way to satisfy this passion. As a kid abroad and later as a foreign correspondent, I saw too many societies that didn't have the benefits of a robust and free press—that didn't have that rigorous scrutiny. Power was concentrated in too few hands. People didn't trust institutions, private or public. Facts were ordered and prioritized by the powerful, and there was fundamentally no truth, except what the leader said was true. Sound familiar? I could always feel how fragile those places were.

Things here, in America, feel fragile now too. Whatever your political persuasion, I think we can all agree that when anything can be derided as Fake News, where do we find that great common ground that makes citizenship and democracy possible? You have spent hours around seminar tables having passionate debates about

Leibnitz, the Bible, Kant and Aristotle. Imagine if you didn't have those books, the words themselves, the fact of text, to guide those discussions. Yet that is the world in which we now live.

You are all entering the working world at a precarious but exciting moment. During the 2016 election cycle I was pretty depressed about the power of institutions to safeguard our democracy and hold power to account. My chosen profession, journalism, seemed to have lost its power to change the world. Story after story exposing the fundamental unfitness for office of the nominee of the Republican party seemed to make no dent at all. Exposés of his shady business practices rolled right off him. A recording of him talking about sexually assaulting women, along with a collection of highly credible allegations - almost all of them on the record - from women who had been on the receiving end of his unwanted sexual attention - they all seemed to have no impact at all.

I wasn't just journalism that lost the trust of so many Americans. Lord knows people didn't trust politicians. But they also lost trust in banks and corporations. In institutions of higher learning. In the courts and government agencies. In educators and in doctors. In churches and religious leaders.

And whatever profession you choose, you will face this fundamental erosion of trust in institutions. Whether you choose the law, medicine, teaching, engineering, business or the clergy, to name just a handful of career paths, you will confront a world that has grown deeply illiberal, resistant to the reasoned discourse you have spent the last four years celebrating.

Make no mistake, we are confronting a crisis of illiberalism. And illiberalism is borne out of mistrust, of a failure of people to see one another as fully human. For liberty and trust are two sides of the same coin. Liberty without trust is a Hobbesian nightmare. We cannot have one without the other.

I think about my own line of work. When Trump won, there was a lot of hand-wringing. Did some of my colleagues in the news media treat Trump's candidacy like entertainment, rather than interrogating him as a serious candidate? (Spoiler: the answer to that question is yes.)

Did the roiling, angry white middle and working classes get enough coverage? Was elite media too wrapped up in its coastal bubbles? Did we miss the big story? It seemed like a moment of perhaps paralyzing self-reflection.

But then something happened. Journalism got its mojo back. In the past year we've had some of the finest accountability journalism I've seen in my career. Two incredibly resourceful beat reporters at Politico caught the health secretary red-handed taking very expensive private jets on the government dime. Their exposé ended his tenure.

We've had breathtaking reporting on the investigation into election meddling by Russia and possible collusion with the Trump administration from a wide range of newsrooms. The earth-shaking work of the New York Times and the New Yorker, exposing the sexual predations of Harvey Weinstein, and breaking the dam of silence about the pervasiveness of sexual harassment and abuse in the workplace. Digital newsrooms, like BuzzFeed, The Daily Beast and the one I lead, HuffPost, broke major stories too. Powerful politicians, business leaders and entertainers from the right and left were felled by relentless investigative reporting. The whole news ecosystem is firing on all cylinders, and it's marvelous to see.

But even as our institutions bounce back, the moral damage to our citizenry will not be easily undone. We're living in a moment where basic questions about our identity as a nation, about our values, are being asked in sometimes scary ways.

Many of us were raised to believe that we are a nation of immigrants, people like my mother, who was born in Ethiopia, and my father's forebears, who came from Cornwall and Sweden.

But things feel very different now. Not long ago, a Republican congressman, Steve King, tweeted that "Diversity is not our strength," a chilling echo of a white nationalist rallying cry by a supposedly mainstream political figure. John Kelly, President Trump's chief of staff, told NPR recently that immigrants from Latin America are "not people that would easily assimilate into the United States into our

modern society. They don't speak English. They don't integrate well, they don't have skills.”

What was he describing if not his own Irish and Italian forebears, who came to this country with nothing in an earlier time, and built lives that would allow their descendant, John Kelly, to occupy one of the most powerful jobs in the land?

We're witnessing a newly permissive attitude toward hate speech and hate crimes that has led to increased attacks on Jews, Muslims and all kinds of marginalized people. People who came to America as young children, who have committed no crimes, face being exiled to nations they have never known.

As the daughter of an African immigrant, as a woman, as a person of color, as a queer person, as a citizen of this great country, I am watching these conversations unfold with particular alarm. I know a lot of you here, who look like me, grew up like me, live lives like mine, are feeling the same way.

So what do we, as people trained in the art of liberal discourse, do?

I am a journalist, so the answer might seem simple: do more and better journalism. Use the full force of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. But the great thing about our founding documents is that the first amendment says nothing about journalism or journalists. The right to free speech lies with each of us, as citizens, and is not the purview of any professional class or faction. It lies with We, the People.

Our first duty as citizens is to hold institutions of power to account. That includes President Trump and his government, as well as the Republican-controlled House and Senate. But it very much includes the Democratic party, and Democratic officials around the country, as well as the infrastructure of government and the institutions of corporate power. As a journalist, it is my job to make sure they feel the full brunt of our relentless investigative reporting and our analytical and intellectual probing.

But we have another duty as citizens, perhaps just as important: to safeguard our liberty we must listen, and learn to see one another as fully human. Last fall, HuffPost went on a bus tour, visiting 26 cities across the nation. Our goal was to listen to America in this extraordinary moment. We avoided the coasts and the major urban centers, stopping in smaller cities like Birmingham, Alabama; Livingston, Montana; and Fort Wayne, Indiana. We had hoped to interview about 500 people over seven weeks. We weren't sure anyone was going to show up when our bus rolled into town.

We need not have worried. It turns out, Americans have a lot to say, and want to be heard. We spoke to nearly 2,000 people. And what they told us was remarkable. Almost no one talked about Donald Trump, either to praise or damn him. People had much more pressing, local issues on their minds.

At the 16th Street Baptist church in Birmingham, where four little black girls were killed in a Klan bombing in 1963, we held a forum on local crime. That night a largely black audience told their entirely black city leadership that something needed to be done about the plague of violent crime in the city. It was an important reminder in the age of Black Lives Matter, when we seek to hold police departments to account for overzealous enforcement policies and outright violence on communities of color, many such communities also suffer from the serious problem of law enforcement neglect. The complexity and nuance of our communities gets lost in shouty headlines and cable news chatter.

In Iowa, we heard from people intensely proud of their community's welcoming of refugee and immigrant communities. In New Orleans, we worked with a local news organization to expose how Airbnb is altering the fabric of the city's historic neighborhoods, hollowing them of local residents and replacing them with tourists.

Mostly we heard stories about communities that are facing struggles, but also coming together to solve them. Talking, debating, arguing, finding imperfect solutions. Sounds familiar, right? It's what we spend our years at this great college doing.

So if I may presume to offer one piece of advice to you all today, it is this: don't be seduced by peddlers of seductive, zero sum false narratives of grievance or triumph. Hold fast to what you've learned here: how to think, argue, listen, change your mind. It is vital to our democracy - to our future and our survival.

I can't wait to see what you all do.

Congratulations!