We gather together in the midst of a world unsettled, seemingly enveloped by an endless cascade of violence and strife across our landscape.

In its wake, we are left weary and anxious.

And afraid.

A century and a quarter ago, Whitman wrote what continues to resonate so powerfully in our times:

Oh me! Oh life! of the questions of these recurring,
Of the endless trains of the faithless, of cities fill’d with the foolish.

Of myself forever reproaching myself, (for who more foolish than I, and who more faithless?)

Of eyes that vainly crave the light, of the objects mean, of the struggle ever renew’d,

Of the poor results of all, of the plodding and sordid crowds I see around me,

Of the empty and useless years of the rest, with the rest me intertwined,

The question, O me! so sad, recurring – What good amid these, O me, O life?

The natural reaction to a rapid succession of tragic occurrence – across our screens, feeds and scrolls – is fear. Fear for our safety, fear of the unknown, and – most tragically – fear of one another.

As wonderfully imperfect human beings, we naturally embrace with relative ease those who look like the person we see each morning in the mirror. We carry our own histories – our emotional and intellectual frames of reference – and too often yield to the steady cadence of what we’ve been taught across so many years is normal, acceptable, and worthy.
It is through that narrow prism that we see ourselves and we see others. As a result, we gravitate to those who share our color, religion, perspective, and identity. Often, we are reluctant to welcome into our orbit those who are different from us and the people we know.

Ironically, the rapid evolution of technology can aggravate, rather than resolve, this instinct. While the world is but a mouse click away, too often we are not drawing ourselves closer together. The web and social media facilitate the individualization of our experiences and associations.

Such confining clustering allows us greater latitude to be lured by the instinct to grasp tightly – and only – to the news, images, and messages that reinforce our view of ourselves and our stereotypes of others. It makes us even more uncertain and fearful of one another.

More given to doubt.

What good amid these?

Rather than be frozen by fear and despair, Whitman summons us to seek our better selves – to be an active presence in the world and in the lives of others.

Again from Whitman:

\textit{Answer.}

\textit{That you are here – that life exists and identity,}
\textit{That the powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse.}

\textit{And you may contribute a verse.}

From this we draw two lessons. First, you belong in the powerful play of Earth’s grand theater. You belong on the stage – regardless of your religion, background, identity, color, creed, place, income, or perspective. You belong because we all play equal and essential parts in life’s rich pageant.

All of us are intertwined and interdependent in the universal script of living with meaning and purpose. Without you, our story falls apart. We need you today to make it all work tomorrow and the many tomorrows to come your way.

The second lesson: the script of life’s play has been written and re-written across the arc of our shared history. And it will be re-written again.

And you may contribute a verse.
What will your verse be?

College campuses are designed to be crucibles of conversation. In the wonderful place you have called home these last few years, we are earning national attention for the way our University has approached our conversations about difference – no matter how uncomfortable, challenging, and sometimes wrenching, they can be.

And you – our students – have led the way, choosing partnership and solution over protest and strife.

Someone made a profound observation to me not long ago. It is not that your generation is more comfortable with difference. But you are more comfortable talking about it; and more willing to admit you don’t always understand.

You are willing to sit down at the table of friendship to talk, listen, challenge, and think anew. You are willing to sit together in conversation; and sit alone in thoughtful repose about defining issues. You are comfortable with questioning long-held beliefs in the presence of those who seem different at first experience, but become familiar and comfortable with each passing moment, word, and deed.

And with enough conversation comes the crucial and graceful moment when the obstacle of difference simply melts away.

A poet of our time – Frank X Walker – reminds us that there is more work that lies before us to “open still too-heavy doors ... There is no vaccination against ignorance. But there is us.”

Us.

What will our verse be?

I ask you now to write a verse that rises above the suspicions and the demarcations of “us and them” borne of fear and unfamiliarity. Instead reach out with the hand of friendship to clasp – and hold fast to – the countless virtues embedded in our common humanity.

Let your verses be about how to talk with one another and learn from one another in the honest and thoughtful conversation that exposes us to difference of experience, perspective, and identity. And then begin the hard and noble work of better understanding and appreciating one another.

Let your verses show us how to discard the obsolete notions of power – notions of title, place, and privilege – and embrace the power of “us” by seeking and finding that unbreakable thread of community that binds us to one another.
Let your verses invigorate and sustain our conversation about inclusion beyond the walls of our campus to our broader communities and our places of worship, culture, and commerce.

Those with whom you will live and work surely “crave the light” amidst these troubled times.

We crave the light.

But we need you to help us find it.

Congratulations to the December Class of 2015. In this important moment of reflection, rejuvenation, and aspiration let us commit ourselves to writing verses of love, compassion, understanding, and hope.

Let us reach out to assure others of there belonging – even as we celebrate that we belong.

Thank you very much.