

May 2017 Commencement Ceremony Address

President Eli Capilouto

May 5-7, 2017

Fourteen days from now, the University of Kentucky will take its place as the first university in the nation to sponsor an Honor Flight.

Early in the morning on May 20, 70 veterans from World War II, the Vietnam War, and the War fought in Korea, will fly from Lexington to Washington, DC to visit the monuments and memorials honoring the Americans who served, were wounded, and who gave what Lincoln called the “last full measure of devotion” to the cause of freedom.

Military veterans on this flight will include the brother of Howard Henry.

Howard Henry was a military ranger from Harlan, Kentucky. He was among the first Americans to die in the effort to liberate Europe from the iron grip of Hitler’s Germany where eleven million innocent men, women, and children were senselessly slaughtered.

Howard Henry was just a few years younger than you seated on the floor when he was called to service. At a time when he should have been preparing for an engineering degree, which was his dream, and enjoying adventure, friends, and love on a college campus, he was plunged into a primitive war fought for the world’s freedom.

Howard Henry certainly wasn’t the only Kentuckian to die in this struggle. More than 9,000 citizens of our Commonwealth had their lives cut short by World War II.

Their names are forever etched in history and glass-encased parchment on the walls of Memorial Coliseum. Think about it – 9,000 individuals of your age – more than 10 times the number of you sitting on our floor today; that’s who lost their lives in the name of freedom.

Historians have called them the “Greatest Generation,” because of their common purpose and values – duty, honor, courage, service, love of family and country, and humility.

But most of all, they were accountable to each other, they had a responsibility to each other, and that responsibility grew to those in oppressed lands – those of different faiths, cultures, ethnicities, and languages. These were the values – the values of a common humanity – that guided their lives in a time of extreme disruption.

So what values will guide you in a time of disruption in which our world finds itself today? Will your generation's values be refined and endure and passed on... or vanish as swiftly as a snap or text?

To be sure, we are living in a different age of disruption than what your ancestors faced during the second World War. But make no mistake about it, we are undergoing a profound sense of disruption in our economy, our way of life, and examining many of the values we believed to hold in common with each other.

U.S. Senator Ben Sasse, a trained historian, observed that the past 20 to 30 years and the next 20 to 30 years are historically unique.

He believes you are graduating during potentially the largest economic disruption in recorded human history.

And, he says, what sets the current disruption apart from those in the past is that those individuals who are impacted most have less time to adapt than in previous economic revolutions.

In Howard Henry's days, we followed in our parents' and grandparents' footsteps. We took the jobs they knew, we lived where they lived. "Job choice" was a convention determined by family and place.

Outside of their foreign military deployments, past generations rarely traveled more than 100 miles from their hometown their entire lives.

Today, science and technology has made farming, manufacturing, and mining more efficient, enabling products to move to market more rapidly, more cheaply, and with less human labor.

Other sectors of the economy have been similarly transformed. All of this has made jobs, our security, where we choose to work less certain -- less permanent.

These are the harsh realities of today's economic disruption. But they are not reasons to be pessimistic – not when you are strengthened by an education that you must keep current through continuous learning and if you indeed hold fast to the values that have sustained us over time.

Values led the "Greatest Generation" to win the war and return home to work hard and gift the world new sciences, culture, and industry.

The question for you today is how — and with what values — will you navigate today's disruption. Because within it, there are deep social divides in our society – across income, geography, race, identity, and perspective – and these seem to continually pull us apart.

And they make it difficult to listen to one another, work together, and trust one another.

All of us, as wonderfully imperfect human beings, naturally embrace with relative ease those who look like the person we see each morning in the mirror.

We all 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 is familiar ... normal ... acceptable ... but sometimes limited.

Ironically, the rapid evolution of technology can aggravate, rather than resolve, this sometimes pernicious instinct. While the world is seemingly a mobile app away, too often we are not drawing ourselves closer together.

The web and social media facilitate the individualization – and, in many cases, the polarization and even disengagement – of our experiences and associations.

Suppose for a moment and consider Facebook: 1.2 billion daily users and one of the 10-highest market capitalized firms in the world.

Facebook is at once the community bulletin board, neighborhood convener, and geopolitical force we've witnessed of seismic proportions in news, politics, media, and culture.

Facebook provides people a platform to promulgate thoughtful and informed dialogue but on the other hand, it can be used to peddle propaganda and gossip.

It has the capacity to significantly and dramatically expand access to information, but, truly on an individual basis, it can restrict the news, images, and messages that reinforce our view of ourselves and our perspectives.

And it can even make us uncertain, fearful, and hateful of one another.

So a challenge for your generation, all of us, especially you, must decide how judiciously and discriminately to use Facebook and other media platforms. If not, I think it can be used by its sophisticated algorithms to narrow our views.

A mind is a terrible thing to close.

Most of the complex challenges presented by our current disruption – economic dislocation, increasing wage gaps, racial and societal estrangement, opioid epidemic, you name it – none of those are bound by dichotomous convention.

There are no simple, quick, or easy solutions – at least not the ones that seem to endure. No one question has a Democratic or Republican answer. No one problem has a secular or non-secular solution.

No, the complex challenges of our day cannot be solved solely by the public or private sector. And more often than not, they require more than individual effort.

They take a community – a community coming together where we talk to one another ... listen to one another ... respect one another ... know one another ... and trust one another so that together we can take those bold steps to solve today's challenges.

They take binding together – willingly stepping outside our blue and red feeds – with a common responsibility to feed and sustain one another.

Facebook – and other platforms like it -- hold promise and peril. They can open our minds and hearts or close them shut. The choice is ours.

Let your intellect and values – cultivated and nourished at your alma mater – be the source of how you will – and must – reinvent yourself time and time again – in your time – as lifetime learners and better citizens.

Let the values of pluralism, curiosity, and a shared responsibility to others be the compass that guides you along your journey.

Howard Henry and his generation were driven by a commitment to a shared cause, informed by shared values, and embraced by an open mind.

In their time, they repaired the world for a future that many of them would not see.

Class of 2017, we bid you farewell with confidence that you will be the living message to a better time we cannot see.

Congratulations.