Graduates, for 13 years, I have presented prominent people to deliver the commencement address. Each of them had something interesting and inspirational to share. This year, my 14th and final year as president of Rollins, I want to speak to you myself.

This commencement is mine as well as yours. We are at very different stages of our lives, but I suspect that we are experiencing some of the same emotions. We are taking our leave of a college we love and the place we have made for ourselves within this college. (I have seen you walking the campus, holding hands, tearfully visiting your special places and saying goodbye to your favorite professors.) We are entering a new phase in our lives, only dimly known, without the familiar pathways and habits we have developed. We are excited and also scared—filled with anticipation, but also anxiety.

Commencement may seem like the end of an experience, but in reality it represents the start of something new. To commence means, literally, to begin. So, although we may be nostalgic for our Rollins experiences and sad to leave our Rollins friends, we are on the threshold of a future full of possibilities. The columnist Ellen Goodman speaks of "The Graceful Exit." It begins, she says, "with the vision to recognize when a job, a life stage, a relationship is over—and to let go. It's leaving what's over without denying its...past importance in our lives. It involves a sense of future, a belief that every exit line is an entry, that we are moving on, rather than out..."

Some of you know exactly what you want to do with your lives. Others are still on a quest to find your calling. Recently, I heard a speaker advise graduates to make a 50-year plan for their lives, a written plan. I never made such a plan, not even a five-year plan, but I made education and career choices based on whether they would enable me to have an impact, to make a difference in the world.

It took me a while to find my calling, but I found my niche in education. I never expected to become a college president, but these past 14 years have been among the happiest in my life, drawing on all my experiences, skills, and creativity. I am grateful for the opportunity I have had to serve this extraordinary college and I want to thank the trustees, faculty, administrators, and staff for their confidence in me and for their support and friendship. We have been fueled by a desire to produce leaders who will transform the world, and have been guided by the College's historic values: Excellence, Innovation, and Community. Together, we have remade Rollins into a stronger, better, and more widely known institution. Our mission has been to send you forth well educated, and prepared for productive careers, ethical leadership, environmental stewardship, and active citizenship.

I believe that each of us has a responsibility to leave the world a better place than we inherited. To me, this means a world more democratic, more just, and more peaceful. In the 1960s and '70s, we thought we
would eliminate poverty, inequality, and injustice. In the 1980s, we thought we had seen an end to war. In the '90s, we were reducing global warming. Sadly, here we are in the 21st century, and a long way from achieving those goals.

I want this ceremonial transition into your new lives to be filled with enthusiasm and hope, as you go off to graduate school, a new job, travel, or public service. But, even on this happy day, I would be irresponsible not to remind you of the grave decisions America faces and to urge you to play your part in the national dialogue that we must have. The issues that you cannot escape include the following: Is American-style democracy possible in every nation? Under what circumstances should America go to war? Should there be a military draft in America? If so, should women be drafted? Given the terrorist threat, what is the appropriate balance between the safety we need and the freedoms we enjoy?

As you consider these problems and your perspective on them, you will find yourself turning to your Rollins education—to reason, to question, and to communicate. One of your generation’s greatest challenges is to find a way to bridge the widening divide between our own people. We are conservatives or liberals, right wing or left wing, and we accuse each other of being un-American and unpatriotic. We have lost the ability to compromise and to reach consensus. Your challenge is to create a truly democratic society where people of unlike views and beliefs can have a civil discussion and find a way to make national and foreign policy together.

How can we as individuals have an impact on such big problems? A number of you graduates have participated in demonstrations in Orlando, Tallahassee, and Washington. Others have written editorials and organized debates. As Margaret Mead famously reminded us, "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world." Knowing nothing and doing nothing are not options for liberally educated college graduates. You have to be informed. You have to participate in the national debates. You have to have the civic courage to express your opinions and get involved in politics. In the aggregate, small actions by individuals can have a powerful impact. Stephen Jay Gould, a Harvard zoologist, noted that "the ordinary human decency of a billion acts of kindness, done by millions of good people, sets a...powerful counterweight" to acts of cruelty and hate. In other words, a small rudder can turn a big ship.

You are commencing the next phase of your lives, as I am commencing mine. I approach this new chapter of my life still wanting to make a contribution. People ask me what I will do in the coming years. I plan to teach and write about leadership and governance in higher education. To me, nothing is more important than producing well-educated women and men, like yourselves, who can create a happier and healthier world. You will find your own way to make a contribution. You will make a difference. You will make us proud. (Do stay in touch with your professors. Their lives are devoted to your success, and they thrive on following your progress. In a new book, Fiat Lux: Teaching in Paradise, edited by Dr. Maurice O'Sullivan, Curry Professor of Literature, Dr. Barbara Carson, Alfond Professor of English, speaks of professors having an "awareness of the lingering place reserved for us in our students' memories." In the years ahead, let them know how they have influenced your lives.)

We leave Rollins with gratitude and sadness, but we take with us forever the things we have learned here and the people we have become. Graduates, you and I—together, we exit gracefully. As we enter this new phase of our lives, and every new phase, let us keep learning and let us put our learning to good use—as family members, as workers, as citizens. Let us leave our world a little better than we found it. Good luck!