President Trachtenberg, distinguished members of the faculty, staff, parents guests and members of the 2006 graduating class of George Washington University; truth be told, the only baccalaureate address I can remember is one delivered by the late Mr. Rogers, of Public Television’s Mr. Roger’s Neighborhood when he spoke at my eldest son’s graduation from Boston University, many years ago. And the reason why I remember it is that he lead the soon to be graduates in a chorus of “It’s A Beautiful day In the Neighborhood.” And everyone knew the words!

Whether I provide anything of value for you to remember as you embark on the important journey soon to be undertaken following graduation will never be known to me. For my generation, “the boomers,” is passing the torch of leadership and engagement in the life of this nation and the world on to you and your generation. And with regret we are passing a torch that has lost some of it brightness in a too often darkened nation and world. As you embark on this journey and others that will surely follow remember this; that the productivity and success of each one of you and your generation will be judged ultimately less by your title, what you own, what kind of car you drive, the size of your bank account or investments, the location of your residence and the status you have derived from your educational endeavors and far more by what you have been able to give back for “the common good of the commonwealth,” gifts given to a nation, its citizens and the world that are all desperately crying out today for healing and wholeness. As the lead generation of the 21st century you are seen by many as one of the most privileged and best educated of any in the history of our great nation. George Washington University has prepared you well for what lies ahead. However, cynics in our too often cynical world have also referred to your generation as the “me” generation. Prove the cynics wrong when you walk away from this great university and give back to others what others here have so lovingly and patiently given to you.

Now some history from a 20th century baby “boomer” I was born of parents who had lived through and survived the depression. The Stock Market had crashed and yet, my father was able to graduate from Tufts University in 1929; the first of five brothers and sisters to attend college. And yet after his graduation, jobs were hard to come by. With no work available for a recent college graduate with a degree in civil engineering he was offered a position with the local market delivering groceries to wealthy families, ensconced in massive summer mansions strung along Massachusetts’s North Shore from Gloucester to Marblehead. They stood out like obscenely large, opalescent pearls, strung on a gaudy, thick, golden necklace. The mansions were built by the financial scions and robber barons of that time who had sheltered their investments and amassed huge fortunes prior to the establishment of the federal Income tax. They lived well!

My dad’s father lost his real job during the depression and shoveled coal to keep the boilers stoked at the local Manchester-By-The Sea, Post Office. At night he delivered blocks of ice to the estates of the wealthy along the North Shore.

My mother was a Provincial school teacher who had begun her teaching career in a one room school house located on a point of land stretching out into the Bay of Fundy outside the town of Amherst, Nova Scotia, Canada. She taught grades seven through twelve and
rode to school every morning on horseback. Her classes were made up mostly of young men and women who were descendants of slaves who through the Underground Railroad, escaped to Canada from the United States. Eventually my mother immigrated to this country so that her children might grow up to live out the American dream and escape the poverty that she had known in the Maritimes.

Given the current battles raging over immigration and citizenship status in this country, all of us need to be reminded that the only true native born citizens of this country are the first Americans whose land we acquired through violence bordering on genocide, trickery and faulty treaties and that continue to marginalize Native Americans in ways that still disgrace this nation. All of us who are American citizens today are the product of immigrants who came to these shores with the hope of a better life and a better future for their offspring. Others are the descendants of slaves who came here not of their own will but because they were sold like cattle to carry the burden of an emerging American economy that needed cheap labor. Today, the battle continues over a new wave of slavery defined by those who till the fields, harvest our crops, who work in environments where others refuse to work in, yet still live, like those who came before them, clinging to the vision of the American dream...a dream of a better life for themselves and their offspring.

As a “baby boomer” I grew up, graduated from High School, went to college and then Seminary during the turbulent times and challenges of the 1960’s and 70’s. I remember the days when President John Fitzgerald Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy and the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King were assassinated. I lost three good friends from my small graduating high school class in 1963. They served as soldiers killed in Vietnam working as advisors to the South Vietnamese military. Ron, Skinny and Beezy are constant reminders of what happens when a government loses its way, driven by political ideologues whose vision of freedom had become a perverse negative of what the real picture of freedom and democracy looks like as originally envisioned by the authors of the Constitution. Ron, Skinny and Beezy’s names are engraved in stone on the “wall” of the Vietnam War Memorial but that memorial will never be enough to explain to their families and friends why they died.

And I can remember the day and the gut wrenching pain when four unarmed students were shot to death by members of the Ohio National Guard on the campus of Kent State University during an antiwar protest. I can remember cities burning following Dr. King’s assassination and the revelation of a nation’s resignation crystallized through the lenses of poverty and racism that permeated the great cities of this country. Those days saw the emergence of the student and youth fueled movements of the Peace Corps, the Students for A Democratic Society, the Weathermen and the Black Panthers; the Hippies, Wavy Gravy, and the Hog Farm, Ken Keazy and the misdirected drug euphoria of the “Summer of Love” in the Haight Ashbury District of San Francisco; of the Grateful Dead, Janice Joplin, Jimmie Hendrix, and the politics of a radically changing music scene composed and performed by Bob Dylan and Crosby Still Nash and Young and even my own rock band as we toured the United States and Canada for three years. They were the halcyon days when we as students, like maybe some of you, believed that we could change the
domestic and foreign policies of our government by political activism, engagement and protest. And in so many ways we did.

And in all of it I believe that my generation was driven by the powerful words and vision of President John Fitzgerald Kennedy when he challenged my generation with his inaugural address to the Nation; “Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country!” It was a challenge to a new generation of Americans whose families had survived the depression and the Second World War. It was a generation that had been nurtured by parents and taught by teachers to give back to their community, nation and the world by sharing the gifts acquired through our education, and the gifts of a new found abundance. And so we tried! It was a generation that had been uplifted by the decision of “Brown vs. The Board of Education,” Rosa Parks, the March on Selma and the Civil Rights Act.

In my own family I was constantly reminded that I must give back much of what I had been given, to make my neighborhood, my community and nation better. Service for the betterment of humankind was a constant theme and we were nourished by it just as we were nourished by meals of “creamed chipped beef on toast;” a delicacy during the scarcity immediately following World War II.

We had a big glass jar on our kitchen table labeled “God’s Money” where each week all in my family were reminded to place 10% of what we had earned so we could feed the hungry in our neighborhood and town and where in some small way our efforts as one family could make a difference in the lives of others. Some of you might say it was corny; but you know, it worked! And the vision of that jar has remained with me even to this day as a motivator to continue the work of human stewardship.

It finally occurred to me when I was on the road as a musician and then again as I began working with the Students for A Democratic Society during those turbulent times of the 1960’s and 70’s that change can never really be initiated by the politics of legislation. For more often than not political and legislative change will always be reactive. Real proactive change can only occur when the human heart is changed and then from there, the political process will more often than not follow the heart.

I ask you to be the vanguards of a new generation where the compassionate heart trumps the politics of expediency and self interest, and where the care of the very young, the poor and elderly, the sick and those who come here to America looking for a better life may find it with your help.

I ask you to be the vanguards of a new generation where the compassionate heart trumps the global politics of national self interest and where we really care and act globally, motivated by mutual respect and the sharing our abundance with those whose lives are defined by scarcity.
I ask you to be vanguards of a new generation where the compassionate heart trumps the spiraling investment in militarism and condemns the nuclear arms race as the ultimate definition of human failure.

I ask you to be the vanguards of a new generation where the compassionate heart trumps religious bigotry and condemns those who use religion as a weapon for war and asymmetrical terrorism. For monotheists, religion is defined by the experience of knowing one God, as revealed primarily through the three great Abrahamic Faiths; Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Each one of these great, monotheistic world religions challenges us to become a new people defined by radical hospitality. Empowered by their histories and traditions their theologies remind us that we must above all else seek peace with our neighbors and care for the sick, the friendless and the needy among us.

And so I now put before you this question; “Is there a phrase, a trend, a clarion call to action and engagement that will unleash your gifts to an expectant nation and world as the best educated in the history of our country. What is it that will encourage each one of you to use your gifts to address the needs of our cities, the nation and world and to make your much needed contribution to lift up the “common good, of the commonwealth? Hear the words of Alexis De Tocqueville. Please remember the time in which he wrote when he speaks about churches, for we are now a nation populated by thousands of temples and mosques as well. We are at the very least a broadly diverse, interfaith nation.

“I sought the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there.

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her fertile fields and boundless forests, and it was not there.

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there.

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her public school system and her institutions of learning, and it was not there.

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her democratic congress and her matchless constitution, and it was not there.

Not until I went into the churches of America and her pulpits flame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because America is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.”

My generation was steeped in idealism. Yours must be steeped in reality. And here is some of the reality that you and I must face.

Over one billion people around the world live in extreme poverty, surviving on less than $1.00 a day.
Across the globe, more than 800 million people go to bed hungry every night.

Every 30 seconds, an African child dies of malaria.

Every year more than 10 million children die before their fifth birthday from completely preventable diseases like diarrhea and pneumonia.

Every day over 20,000 people die because they are too poor to stay alive.

"America is great, because America is good."

There are 73 million children living in the United States today in some form of poverty. The poverty level for a family of 4 is $20,000. For a family of 3 it is $16,000. And for a family of 2 it is $13,200. The number of children living in poverty in the United States has increased by over 12% in the last four years.

"America is great because America is good."

America’s public education system is today a definition of educational apartheid. John Lewis, civil rights leader and a distinguished congressman from Georgia reminds us that in the poorest communities in America, which are largely communities of color, we are experiencing a level of segregation not seen since slavery.” “During the 1990’s, there has been a rising wave of backlash against principles that formed the basis of the civil rights campaign. Lewis states that, “the dismantling of court-ordered integration and the recent movement toward school vouchers are leading us to turn away from one another, by retreating into separate tribes, destroying much of the hope and structure of belief that hold the most tenuous parts of our society together.”

"America is great because America is good."

And as the issue of tax cuts continues to challenge the conscience of America, since 2001, Congress and the Administration have spent $323 billion for war operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. Hurricane relief from 2006-2009 is projected to cost the United States Government $117 billion; and this at a time when Social Security is expected to run out of money by 2040 and the future of federally sponsored medical care for the elderly and the very young is at great risk.

Globally, 43 million souls live with HIV/AIDS. Every minute of every day, 9 more persons are infected, and most of those infections are now occurring among women and children. During this decade, more people will die of AIDS than from all the wars and natural disasters of the past 50 years.

"America is great because America is good."
As a native New Englander, I close with a poem by Robert Frost. It is a poem that quite possibly can serve each of you well as you embark on a new road that quite possibly will strengthen you for the days ahead and that has always defined the journey that continues to call me, even as my generation passes on leadership to a new generation—your generation.

The Road Not Taken

Two roads diverge in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Robert Frost

The Right Reverend John Bryson Chane, D.D.
Eighth Episcopal Bishop of Washington
Baccalaureate Address
George Washington University
May 19th, 2006