

Dear Graduates – it is such an honour to be here with you today. Graduations are one of the big landmarks of life. They mark major achievements in learning and growth. So first, let me send my heartfelt congratulations to you all. We are all so proud of you for having worked so hard to reach this very important milestone. Savour this moment, and make sure you can see how far you have come. Please think about the work that you put in, and also consider the support from those around you that got you here. Perhaps we can have a round of applause and gratitude for everyone in the room? A hero's journey is a collective effort.

It has been quite a ride, hasn't it? The road to this moment has been one riddled with challenges and obstacles unseen by other generations. The experience you shared to get here is one that will bond you as a group as you go forth in the world. The road was uncharted, but you braved forth. Together - with your peers, your parents, your teachers and your communities – you found a way through the many issues and pains of the covid era. You found a way to work with the tools at hand to complete your education. While it may not have been an optimal way to learn the material in your textbooks, perhaps it was the ultimate educational experience for living a purposeful life. While we all wish for a youth that is carefree and easy, perhaps what we learned during covid is that while harder to find, there is always a path through the darkness towards achievement and growth.

There is no generation that knows better what change look like than yours. The world as we knew it was taken away overnight by a virus. And yet you forged on and have made it here today. Take a good look at yourself though – as you enter the next stage of your life, are you aiming to survive, or are you truly aiming to thrive?

We stand at a crossroads today – not just you, as graduates, but all of us living in Hong Kong. We are tired, we are traumatized, and while we are in the midst of re-opening to the world - what a world we are looking at reintegrating with. From climate change to inequality and geopolitical tensions – it's going to be quite a ride. And covid – we may have more defenses with vaccines and drugs, but what do we actually know? What might the long-term health effects be? But this is the central dilemma, isn't it? The truth is, knowledge has never been complete, the future has always been uncertain, and the past has always been difficult. It's really just how you see it, and the attitude and vision which you take with you as you navigate through that drives your choices.

I am an exceptionally lucky person. I won the genetic lottery and am decently talented and quite healthy. I grew up living with my liberal mother within a lineage of no sons. I was given every opportunity as a girl to achieve – forced to almost, with someone behind me constantly cheering me on to take on more, and to step up. I was given the right to have a mind *and* to have a voice, even from a young age. From my father, I was taught (and this was difficult as a child for sure) that there are no standards worth having other than the highest standards. I was taught that I should strive for *excellence*, not just existence. And I was taught that while I am deserving of love as a human being, becoming deserving of respect requires more.

As we all go forth into the future, I hope that you will be able to see the trials of the last few years as a lesson from which you grew. I hope that you see these years as a testament to

your strength, and that you remember what it took to get you through it all. Use all of this as you move towards new heights and tackle new challenges. You have shown how it is *possible* and that you are *strong* – take it all with you as you face the world. Graduates you inspire me – you come out of this period having moved forward to the next level. This is growth within the hardest of circumstances. You are a living testament to the fact that more is possible even when so much is taken away. You are not just survivors – you have it in you to look for more.

Resilience is the support we get from each other in difficult times, as well the ability to see that which is broken for how it could be beautiful, rather than as that which it no longer is. It is the ability to change even when habits are engrained, and to learn even when beliefs are entrenched. But resilience is not just the ability to *make it through*, but rather to find a way to transform and then to *build forward, always*. Certainly, there will be moments when all we have is the ability to hold on, but the belief that there is an “after” or “beyond,” and the incessant desire from the bottom of your heart to get there and to come out *better* - that is part of being resilient too. If we stand still forever, we actually move backwards. The world keeps turning, with or without us. It is painful to think it, but it is a truth, nonetheless. And that means that we will have to learn first to look far and think BIG. And then we will have to learn how to deal with pain and failure. Because when you have big dreams, you fall down often. But if you don’t think big, you’re stuck and soon to be behind.

So let me give you two things today. First – let me give you the right to think big and to swing hard. Your degrees are probably more of a reason for you to believe you have that right, but if you need a face and a voice in your head when you get told you shouldn’t? Think of me. Each of us needs a champion to remind them that they can do it, and that it’s their right to ask for more. Each of us needs someone to push them to aim higher, and to dig deeper. When you aren’t sure, remember these words – *why not you?* My support comes with a caveat though – that you must try your hardest and give your all. If you aren’t willing to go all in, then please, ignore what I just said. The only way to outperform is to do the hard work. It will be hard, and it will be painful, but that’s what it takes.

Second – let me give you a big imaginary hug, and a tissue for your tears. When you do hard things, you get hurt along the way. It doesn’t mean that the thing wasn’t for you, but it means that you need to accept that failure is part of the path to success. You must be able to see that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with you. So after a good cry and as many chats are required with a trusted friend, mentor, or therapist – find a new way and try again. Remember, failure is merely a successful attempt in how not to do something. Failure is *not* a reason to not try again. If the day comes – its ok not to be ok. And with the right support and unyielding aspiration, you will find a new path. Keep at it.

As we collectively stand on the precipice of new opportunities, let us all remember that we have a role to play in the development of tomorrow. Our own personal futures are in our hands, and our collective future is in our hands as well. Let me share that there will be no greater beauty than that which we have created ourselves. And it is a real possibility if we just align ourselves towards that beautiful and better future. Think often about the fact that while we all have an instinct to survive, that we must work towards being able to thrive.

Thriving is the goal, even when surviving is all we can see for now. Be grateful for what you have as it did not need to be. But remember, it can still be better and don't let that go.

I wish you the strength, the clarity and the creativity to break through and challenge habits and norms that hold you back. With the lessons and learnings of your past, experience and reap the present with full hearts and big eyes. I look forward to hearing of all of your achievements and of the magnificent lives you will have one day. Good luck and once again – congratulations dear graduates. Cheers to a life worth living!