Good evening friends, family, faculty, and finally, Brandeis University’s Class of 2019. It is a singular honor to be able to address you on this very special day. This is, in some ways, a moment outside of time. It will live on in our collective memory unbound by the physical laws that move us relentlessly from one instant to the next. In other ways however, today is also very much a moment defined by its time.

As the Class of 2019, our college years have been marked by the retreat of the global liberal order. Britain choose to leave the European single market. Donald Trump, following his election initiated a trade war with China. This is to say nothing of Viktor Orban, or Rodrigo Duterte, or Jair Bolsonaro or Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador. Our understanding of the dangers and capabilities of the technology at our disposal has expanded. Russia used Facebook to influence an American election. The stock market now soars and crashes at the mercy of the latest tweet. Anti-Semitism is on the rise. Conspiracy theories and fringe ideologies lurk in hidden corners of the internet. Although this feels normal now, this is not normal. It was never normal. The world is changing both incrementally yet also at an astonishing pace.

Yet, we must remind ourselves that although the word we enter today is not the one we envisioned entering in 2015, there are some immutable fundamental truths. Chief among those is that we are, all of us, only human. The mistake, though, is to see that as a limitation, when in fact it is something incredibly freeing. You see, everyone, including presidents, writers, philosophers, scientists, businessmen, musicians…every single one of them had the same doubts, fears, goals, and aspirations. Each of them had failings. All of them had days when they didn’t want to get out of bed. Days when all they wanted to do was sit back and read a good book. Most of them are governed by the same emotions that, whether we admit it or not, govern us. This is a lesson I think is best learnt and understood in college, especially a college like Brandeis, for a very simple reason. All those writers, businessmen, scientists…maybe even presidents…they’re you. They’re the class of 2019.
I have had the distinct privilege of getting to know the people that have comprised the class of 2019, and it is so incredibly freeing to meet and know all these incredible people who will undoubtedly go on to do great things, and to know them as human beings. I have been lucky enough over these last four years, as I think many of us have, to get to know people who are certifiable geniuses, people who will undoubtedly do great things and be at the top of their field.

I’ve seen a top banker drive himself insane till four in the morning in search of the perfect Belgian beer glass. I made nerdy economics jokes with the President of Mexico. I complained about housing numbers with any number of luminaries.

The reason these experiences are so freeing to me is that I have seen, first hand, your personal processes for demanding what it is you desire and are passionate about from the universe. I have seen, first hand, your quick wit, your commitment to change, your indomitable will, your triumphs and your failures, major and minor. God knows I have had my fair share of both over these four years as well.

It was through those experiences, by getting to know you in those small, hidden, pointlessly intimate ways, that I gained the confidence to ask for what I desire from the universe. As a high school student, I always felt like a stranger in the working world, as though the people in offices or running stores were somehow fundamentally different to me. I imagined that they had some special hidden knowledge or power that allowed them to understand life and work better than I did. The Class of 2019 taught me the power of self-belief because I saw all these wonderful people I believe in completely and whole heartedly just being human. You all taught me that the single most important factor in doing what you want, being who you want, and getting what you want is how bad you want it. It really is.

You also taught me you cannot go it alone. If it wasn’t for the cooking advice from the future lawyer, or the style advice from a computer scientist, or the motivation to go to the gym from a doctor, I certainly would not be the person I am today. Even more than that though, if it wasn’t for the life advice from a film major or the emotional support from
the future CEO of a company, I would have fallen when I stumbled. One of the lessons I learned in college is that ‘the system’ is an illusory concept. It is, essentially, normal people going about their regular lives everywhere, all the time. This is both liberating and terrifying because it means anything can happen, but it also means ANYTHING can happen. There is no safety net. Or so I thought.

Because you see, over the past four years here at Brandeis, you finally taught me that YOU are the safety net. Friends and family, that’s all we have. All this is to say very simply, Class of 2019, I have been privileged to know you, because you are certainly a brilliant bunch, but more than that, you’re interesting, compassionate, involved people and that is why I have no doubt you all will succeed.