Imagine we had a time machine and you could fast forward 20 years from now.

It’s 2038, we’ve got hoverboards, tourist trips to the moon, 3D printed food…. Life is tremendously exciting.

But what about you? Where are you? What are you doing?

Why don’t you close your eyes for just a moment and think about that? What kind of life are you leading?

So. Did anyone imagine themselves being the Commencement speaker receiving an honorary doctorate from The Ohio State University?

No? Neither would I if someone had asked me that same question when I sat where you are right now.

*Because that was before I went from life being all about “me”, to it being all about “us”.*

From worrying about my grades, my CV, my career, and thinking instead about what I could do for our world, and our pursuit of human progress.

Graduates, as you think about what comes next, move your thoughts from thinking about “me” to thinking about “us”.

Here’s how I got there.

I am second of seven kids, born in what was then the farming community of Napa in California, who moved to the tiny town of Reno, Nevada, when the population was about 50,000 and there were sagebrush-laden fields everywhere.

There, my pharmacist Dad and his friend opened a family-owned drug store.

Growing up, I attended small Catholic schools with my brothers and sisters.

I loved school. I loved math and science.

In our family, it was, “Do you like subjects like Mom?”—who was an English teacher—or, “Do you like subjects like Dad?”

I was like my Dad.
I would walk around as a kid with his white coat and a plastic stethoscope giving orders to my sisters who played nurse and receptionist.

I participated in every sport. Literally every sport. If they had a girls’ team, I was in.

In track the longest distance was 800 yards, because, you know... we were girls.

From the age of age 15, I worked every summer saving money for college, but I wasn’t suffering; the last summer job I had was lifeguard at Lake Tahoe.

When I was a freshman at University of Nevada, Reno, my youngest sister Jen was born.

I raced through my undergrad in 3 years, helping out my Mom and living at home, eager to get to Medical School.

I was in the second graduating class at University of Nevada Medical School and by the fourth year I was eager to get out of my small town (and my parent’s house).

And I came right here to The Ohio State, where I rented a room, spent a month on the cardiology service, experienced a Buckeye’s football game.

I loved every minute—just as I’m sure you have.

But here’s the point: I was 24 years old, from a small town in Nevada, and Columbus was the furthest east I had ever been.

So, when I think about the kind of life I imagined myself living back then there is no way it would have resembled any part of my life as it has been.

I felt and acted like an underdog, seeing other people experience a lifestyle and opportunities that seemed foreign to me.

As a result, I was constantly striving to demonstrate my worth—showing that I could keep up.

And when I was accepted as a Medicine resident at University of California, San Francisco—the first resident from Nevada ever—that feeling grew even stronger.

I remember the first day so well.

We were all sat around a big table—the 25 new residents—and as we went around, everyone introducing themselves, I sank further and further into my seat.
All I could hear was “Stanford”, “Johns Hopkins”, “Harvard”, and so on.

Then it came to me and I had to say, “University of Nevada, Reno”—and I felt like adding, “Yes, it does have a medical school! And, you know, I read all the same books as you!”

Some people call that feeling “imposter syndrome”, the sense that you don’t belong, that others are somehow more ready, more worthy, more likely to succeed.

All I know is that I spent a lot of time—too much time—proving myself.

Then I had the chance to leave the United States for the first time. And that’s when everything changed.

I went to Uganda.

My years spent learning medicine, learning oncology at UCSF coincided with the terrifying AIDS epidemic that was sweeping the Bay Area.

My experience on the frontlines meant I was asked to go to Uganda to help.

I became the physician who cared for all the adult cancer patients at the Uganda Cancer Institute, while teaching and conducting research.

It was an incredibly difficult time in Uganda and the job was emotionally and physically challenging (Remember, I hadn’t been further from home than Columbus at this point).

But I was never the same again.

I realized for the first time that being smart doesn’t matter, unless you use your intelligence for a greater purpose.

I started thinking about how to serve humanity, how to make a contribution to humanity.

I went from it being all about “me”—to it being all about “us”.

For each of you, it will be a different experience that does it.

The important thing is that you have it as soon as possible.
I regret that it took me so long because proving yourself is way less important than making a contribution.

Graduates, one of the most common things we all do is underestimate ourselves, underestimate our capacity to make a difference to humanity.

But look at you.

For one thing, you’ve got a head start on that goofy kid from Reno.

Thanks to technology and social media, you’re already globally engaged, with an understanding of the world far beyond anything my generation had at your age.

And then there’s this other huge asset, which we are celebrating today.

Class of 2018, you have had the benefit of attending one of the best universities in our country.

There is no other major research university in America that is opening access and achieving success for low-income students and first-generation students as much as this one.

The Ohio State is making your stories ones of possibility, ones filled with opportunity.

The challenge for you now is to make the most of it.

So, how will you do that? How will you make your own transition from “me” to “us”?

Here are 2 lessons I learned along the journey I just told you about.

The first: question yourself.

Because good intentions are not good enough—that’s still all about “me”.

My moving to Uganda, conducting cancer research, even today as head of Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation… I find it odd that I get credit for the jobs I’ve had.

People would tell me—oh, you worked in Uganda, that’s impressive.

Do not give me credit for moving. Ask me what I got done. What was the impact of my going? How did people’s lives improve?
Here’s what I want to be able to say:

- That in Uganda, students learned medicine from my teaching that allowed them to care for others, and very sick patients had less suffering because I treated their cancer.

- Or. That as a cancer researcher, I was part of teams that developed drugs that help millions of women survive breast cancer with fewer side effects and more targeted and effective therapy.

- Or. That thanks to the work we are doing at Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, more children than ever before are surviving past their 5th birthday and that we are on the cusp of wiping polio off the face of the earth.

What keeps me awake at night these days isn’t the thought of failing an exam, or worrying about how people will think of me in a job interview; it is that we at Gates Foundation might not make a big impact.

Don’t settle for the comfort of good intentions—get out of your echo chamber, challenge your beliefs, and change your mindset.

That’s my first big lesson: question yourself.

My second big lesson is to question what other people tell you.

Because the best advice isn’t always the best advice.

As I weighed my opportunity to work in Uganda, I have a very distinct memory of a senior colleague telling me that I would ruin my academic career by leaving the country.

How many of you would ignore that advice? And, by the way, it was very good advice—because he was right.

For 2 years I didn’t publish or network or do all the things needed to become a tenure track faculty member.

When I returned from Uganda I was expecting the professional equivalent of a ticker-tape parade.

Instead there were no funds available for me to continue as a faculty member, and no options then for pursuing global health or cancer research as I had dreamt.
Just as my friend Bob had warned me, my academic career had ended and I needed to find something else to do.

But here’s the point: that was the best advice I never took.

Because it meant I finally switched my metrics for success from what something could do for my career, to how I would use my skills and what I’d learned in service to human progress.

Never at any point since then have I felt the need to prove myself.

Class of 2018, it’s your turn now.

Through your resilience, your persistence, your brilliance, you have earned the right to seize the next exciting opportunity.

And when you move your thoughts from thinking about “me” to thinking about “us”, you will be embarking on the path to leading a meaningful life.

A life where you don’t just make a dollar, you make a difference, where you don’t just settle for personal happiness, you fulfill a noble purpose.

Graduates, there are those on the field who make progress happen, and those on the sidelines who ask: what happened?

It’s 2038, which one are you?