I didn’t realize I’d be first. You have to be prepared. President Smith, trustees, deans, and members of the administration, faculty, and staff, honorary degree recipients, proud parents and families and friends, and most importantly, graduates of the Suffolk University Class of 2015. It is a great honor and pleasure for me to be one of your commencement speakers along with Governor Baker, who recently stood tall for the recognition of the Armenian genocide of 1915. Thank you, Governor Baker.

First of all, congratulations. You have done it. Today you’re entering an improved labor market that rewards education. You have created a great advantage for yourself through the hard work it took to earn your degree, and through the support you have received from your parents, your teachers, and others who have mentored you along the way. Unfortunately, our still recovering economy does not offer such advantages to those without degrees. An ever increasing percentage of our workforce cannot achieve financial independence. They work hard in jobs that do not provide benefits, and beneath this low wage workforce lies an even more desperate population that is shut out of the economy altogether for reasons that range from isolation to homelessness to criminal record, often for nonviolent offenses. Poverty is very real in our country, and the mass incarceration that began with the War on Drugs in the 1980s is a failed policy that plagues our communities and our taxpayers alike. Frankly, we have not done very well with any of our wars since we abandoned the War on Poverty, despite the heroism of those we have sent to fight these wars. So, along with the opportunity you now have comes the obligation to find your own personal ways to address the opportunity gaps in our society for those without opportunity. What can we possibly do as ordinary people? How do we reconcile our opportunity and advantage with the injustices we see around us? I suggest that a way to find happiness in the face of injustice is to identify what moves you and to act. That will make a difference.

I am no stranger to opportunity and advantage. My father, Steven Mugar, came to this country from Armenia the same year that Suffolk University was founded in 1906. He had this opportunity only because his parents, though uneducated, had the wisdom to recognize the dire events at the end of the 19th century for what they were, massacres of 300,000 Armenians, which was the precursor to the Armenian genocide of 1915, exactly 100 years ago. Had they stayed in their homeland, the family might very well have perished along with a million and a half other Armenians. Three out of every four Armenians were killed. As a result of my
grandparents’ foresight, my father had the privilege of growing up in America. As a young man, he and his family opened a small neighborhood market in Watertown Square, Star Market, which he developed into several other supermarkets in the greater Boston area. He honored this history by giving back, including a gift to Suffolk Law School many years ago. When speaking of these gifts while receiving an honorary degree at Suffolk 55 years ago, my father said, quote, I feel very strongly that those who come to the United States from abroad owe a debt to this country just as surely as if they had signed a contract. And I believe strongly that the best way to pay this debt is through educational institutes. My giving to local colleges is also my partial repayment in gratitude for the patron of our customers at Star Market over the many years, unquote. I am proud to be a part of that history.

Today, I would like you to pause and think of what you will do as you move forward. This is what Dr. Martin Luther King said in his letter from the Birmingham jail on April 16, 1962. Quote, injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects us all indirectly, unquote. Just a month ago, 53 years after Dr. King wrote those words, Pope Francis held a Mass in Rome on the occasion of the 100th commemoration of the Armenian genocide. At the Mass, he recognized the genocide for what it was and said, “concealing or denying evil is like allowing a wound to keep bleeding without bandaging it. We simply cannot afford to live denying reality.”

All of you graduates can bandage wounds of others and heal the world. You will be called upon to see and prevent injustice, whether it impacts us directly or indirectly, whether it is our own homeless here in Boston, or those on the streets of Ferguson or Baltimore or in the many conflicts in the Middle East. You might wonder how you will do that. Here’s an example. Just a small one. For 30 years now, I have had the opportunity to serve as executive director of Farm Aid, which is led by Willie Nelson, along with other artists and fellow board members, John Mellencamp, Neil Young, and Dave Matthews. I want to ask you, imagine what it’s like having Willie Nelson and those artists as your boss. Believe it or not, he’s my boss. Anyway, a wonderful person. Willie Nelson founded Farm Aid in 1985. At that time, family farmers were being forced off the land due to economics, bad public policy, and corporate power. He meant to have one concert to raise money and awareness and to stand up for family farmers, but 30 years and 28 concerts later, I know that Farm Aid has bound the roots of today’s movement for good food from family farms. Did Willie know what he was doing when he had that first concert? Probably not. I’m really sure he didn’t. He just knew that something was really wrong in our country if our family farmers were being forced off the land. So, he and Neil and John invited a bunch of their friends, more than 50, actually, and 79,000 concert goers came to the first Farm Aid concert, showing their support for family farmers across this country. Willie stepped up and did something about the problem he saw. He raised money and he sparked a movement. He didn’t plan it, but here he is the most visible committed supporter of family farmers. I say that
about Willie because it is an example of what we all can do. Act where we are using the skills we have.

It may seem odd to suggest that you just jump in without deep consideration. Of course, it’s important to think ahead and to plan, but often, the best thing is to just take that first uncertain step. Life happens when you make choices, when you take action. Get yourself to a place. Take a stand. Be present. If you are afraid, that’s okay. Just do it. Bear witness.

Another example – my late husband, John O’Connor, and I started the Armenia Tree Project in 1994, which was a time of terrible crisis in Armenia, a country that was suffering from a cruel blockade of oil for heat, light, and cooking, and feeling the effects of a very recent devastating earthquake, all during the time of the breakup of the Soviet Union. As Armenia emerged as a free and independent country, families were desperate to heat their homes and cook their meals. They had to burn the only resources they had, their only possessions, furniture, floor boards, even books. To survive, people were cutting down trees everywhere. A painful, painful tradeoff, with devastating environmental consequences. Imagine if the trees outside today were just hacked off.

When our team established the Armenia Tree Project, people asked, how can you plant trees when people are hungry and have no heat? Our answer, it is exactly at that time when everything seems hopeless that you must show the faith necessary to plant for the future. The Armenia Tree Projects plants more than 50,000 trees a year in Armenia, growing not just sustainable forests, but thriving communities. Since 1994, we’ve planted more than 4.5 million trees, including many fruit trees that people feed from now. Even more importantly, our work is a concrete demonstration of the belief that Armenians and the Armenian diaspora has across the world to show faith in the future of their people.

There is a lesson in our story. Ordinary people making a difference. Whatever matters to you, jump in all the way. Be a visionary. Look ahead and imagine the fruits of a sustained effort. Be patient and steadfast enough to effect real change and a far better future. As one of our sages in the agrarian movement, Wes Jackson, tells us, if the work of your life can be accomplished in your lifetime, you’re not thinking big enough.

It may not seem right on this, of all days, to suggest that you graduates are also ordinary people, but I do, and I do so as a compliment because it is we ordinary people who can change the world. A few closing thoughts. First, and number one, be kind. Be kind. Next, move toward what scares you. I often advise people to do this so that in all good conscience, I have to do it myself. I, for one, am scared of public speaking, and if I am advising people to move toward that which scares them, I have to speak publicly. That’s why I’m here. I had to accept the challenge. Be open to change and receptive to possibilities. You are now equipped to go out from this university and to
gauge when the world more. To meet opportunities with your passion and your new skills. To step out and to make a difference. You’re getting a degree today. If you stay curious and open, you will have a lifetime of being educated. Curiosity is continual education.

Next, be an ordinary visionary. Sometimes being a visionary just means getting yourself on the road. I want to tell you about Shirley Sherrod, an extraordinary individual whom I have had the honor to know and work with for 30 years. You may remember Shirley was scapegoated recently by an inflammatory blogger who totally misrepresented what she said to a gathering to the NAACP, trying to paint her as a racist. In reality, Shirley’s father was shot and killed by the Ku Klux Klan in southwest Georgia, leaving her one of five children with an unborn brother on the way. No one was ever prosecuted. At the NAACP, Shirley was talking about how she wrestled with her own sense of prejudice in her work, which was representing black farmers in southwest Georgia. In that work, a white farmer came for some help. She had a revelation as she worked with this man, who was in the same predicament as the many black farmers she worked with. Her revelation was it is not about race, it is about those who have and those who do not. She then went on to say that at the time of her father’s murder, her mother immediately taught her and her siblings that if we live with hate in our hearts, it will consume us. I had the honor of meeting her mother, 82 years old, amazing woman. Shirley, at the time her father was killed, decided to change her plan, which was to leave Georgia and all the discrimination that surrounded her as she was growing up, and she decided to stay and work for social justice in southwest Georgia where she still is today. Just this week, I heard her speak to students at Harvard about her life’s work. To imagine yourself a visionary sounds pretentious. It is not. Shirley reacted to a situation. I’m sure that Shirley would not mind if I called her ordinary. My point here is that we are all ordinary, and that’s good.

Next, don’t do it alone. You have shared your years at Suffolk with fellow students, teachers, and staff. As you venture out, you will encounter new friends and colleagues, new mentors and people who you will mentor. Bring them along. Bring people together. Keep people together. The communities we hope for and envision come from people joined together, sharing a vision, contending with one another about what the future looks like. Finally, I want to reassure you about the future. You may be entering the world in debt and uncertain as you leave the relative calm of this college, though more than any other college you have not been separated from the real world. People like you are going to make all the difference. We see much collective energy afoot today responding to blatant injustices all around us. With ordinary human courage, vision, and the willingness to face uncomfortable truths, and in concert with the special tools you have gained from Suffolk, you, together with others, have the capacity to do what needs to be done. I’ve seen all this at Farm Aid and the Armenia Tree Project, and I know we will all see it in what you do. I look forward to that. Be sure to stay in touch with us, and be sure to enjoy today with your family and friends. You deserve it. Thank you very much.