Thank you for the invitation to join you today.

I have to say that my undergraduate and law professors would be shocked to find me here on this stage as the guest speaker at your graduation. I’m a little shocked too. I guess I never imagined (nor did they) that I would ever have an invitation to be a commencement speaker at a major university. The last time I wore this regalia was May 1979. Maybe someone will record it and I can send it back to Wake Forest so that I can prove this really happened. I think it is fair to say that I am more in tune with academics now than I was through two degrees years ago, and I guess I want them to know that they were ultimately successful in their efforts with me. It took.

I am honored to be here with you on your graduation from the Professional Schools of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. I know this is a special day for you and your families. Whether you are receiving undergraduate or graduate degrees, you have worked hard, and you and your families should be very proud of your achievement.

I would venture a guess that every commencement speaker is just a little nervous. Perhaps they worry whether their remarks will be relevant and inspiring on such a special occasion. Perhaps they worry whether their remarks will be remembered. You worry that the speaker will talk too long. Don’t worry today.

Spaceship Earth is a term made famous by writers and speechmakers such as Henry George, George Orwell, Adlai Stevenson, and others. But to millions of people around the world, Spaceship Earth is the huge geodesic sphere that greets visitors at the entrance to Epcot in Walt Disney World. Housed within the sphere is (or was, I haven’t been there in a few years) a ride that explores the history of communications and promotes the founding principles of Epcot. An early version of the ride was narrated by actor Jeremy Irons and was clear in its message: “Like a grand and miraculous spaceship, our planet has sailed through the universe of time, and for a brief moment, we have been among its many passengers…. We now have the ability and the responsibility to build new bridges of acceptance and cooperation between us, to create a better world for ourselves and our children as we continue our amazing journey aboard Spaceship Earth.”

Discussion of Spaceship Earth usually turns on taking care of our planet and concern about preservation of our limited natural resources. Today I want to build on the words of Jeremy Irons in the Epcot Spaceship Earth, and talk about you, because here, today, if we are to have a better world for ourselves and our children, you are our most valuable resource.

So now, today, how can you help “build new bridges of acceptance and cooperation between us” and help create a better world for all of us? I have three suggestions to share with you, but not just with you. These ideas apply to each and every person here today.
ALWAYS LEARN

We acquire knowledge for a variety of reasons throughout our life. To date, grades, qualifying for a degree and graduation may have been a factor in your learning. For the rest of us jobs and advancement opportunities may have played a role. Moving forward, be purposeful about the acquisition of knowledge. Keep your eyes and your mind open. Challenge yourself. Step out of your comfort zone. Take time to learn about people. New ideas will suggest ways to make the world a better place, but it is only by taking time to learn about others, their needs, their challenges, their customs, and their culture that we will be able to “build new bridges of acceptance and co-operation.” Seek first to understand, then be understood. Therein lies the secret to a better world.

With all due respect to the academic setting that I now find myself, I submit to you that the measure of the importance of the knowledge we gain in our lives is not the innate significance of the knowledge, but is determined by the use we make of the knowledge. By this measure, the most important knowledge I’ve gained in my life has been in the last 5-7 years (at age 61), and it hasn’t been judge world knowledge. My judge world work is about a side of our life I wish didn’t exist. A side of our world that might frighten you. And my judge world does not have the answers. The knowledge I’ve gained in an attempt to find solutions to that side of our world has been outside of my profession, and has been about motivation, education, school discipline, school climate, school-justice partnerships, and cooperation between governmental agencies, because I believe the keys to our future are found in our schools, not in our courts. What will it be for you?

BE RISK TAKERS

Change is important if we are to build a better life for ourselves, our families, and our communities. You can graduate, get a job, start a family, and stroll or struggle through life. Or, you can find the cutting edge and ride the razor’s edge, challenging convention, declining the status quo, and reach for the stars. You know that the sky cannot be the limit any more when there are footsteps on the moon, when discoveries are made on the surface of Mars and when we can take pictures in deep space. This “ride” must happen not only in your chosen profession, and it must happen there, but in other areas where you have interests or talents. It may be the areas that your passion leads you where you have the greatest opportunity to effect change. Remember, a life driven by purpose is a life fulfilled.

So, why you? Because the world needs you. You represent the future of our communities, our great State and Nation, and yes, the world at large. In every generation there have been risk takers who have helped effect positive change. Please do not worry whether you as an individual can make change happen. Author John Maxwell said “One person with courage is a majority.” Maya Angelou said “You are the possible.” Vice-President Joe Biden in his 2009 commencement address at Wake Forest University said “Bend history, individuals make this happen.” All of these words are for you on this special day. Take a chance. Change the world.

BE HUMAN

This is most important of all. Our community and others like it across this great State and Nation, are in crisis. We have children that are hungry, students that struggle to read, families that are imprisoned in poverty, children carrying and using guns, young people growing up having never had a dream, much
less had a dream come true. We have challenges in our communities with race relations, at a time in our lives where we should have learned and we should be living together as brothers and sisters. We’ve seen some of these challenges play out in violence in streets around our country, and in our own community.

I’d suggest that the answer to much of this is found not in our budgets, or programs, or police, but in our humanity. A speaker at a graduation ceremony several years ago spoke about how the greatest regret in his life, in his life, was failures of kindness from years before, when he was a student.

In the last few months I have learned about a young woman named Rachel Scott. Rachel was the first student to die in the tragic school shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado on April 20, 1999. Rachel believed that she could change the world by being nice, by sharing kindness, by starting a compassion reaction. Even though her life was cut short at the hands of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold at age 17, her family created a foundation, Rachel’s Challenge, to spread her message of kindness, to spread her compassion reaction. Her story has been shared with millions of students around the country and the world. Her uncle, Larry Scott, was here on December 1, at Watson College, to share Rachel’s story, and to challenge those present to take on Rachel’s Challenge, to become part of a compassion reaction. I have accepted the Challenge.

Seizing opportunities to share kindness, to exercise compassion, to help our fellow man, and to be servant leaders promoting social justice and healing will lead to change, real change. Failures will lead to regret, and ongoing crises in our communities. Careers and family schedules will consume you. Taking time to be human must be intentional and purposeful. You must take the time. You and your community will be better for it. Exercise humanity.

Am I asking a lot? Absolutely. But you have great skill, great potential, and our Spaceship Earth needs you. So, I’m asking. You are young, but life is short, and the world is watching you, needing you, expecting much from you, individually and as a generation. Is this fair? It doesn’t really matter whether it is fair or not. You are here. You have chosen to be a professional, in one discipline or another. You have demonstrated that you are exceptional. Each of you, and all of us, have the ability to ALWAYS LEARN, to BE A RISK TAKER, and to BE HUMAN. Each of you will soon start a life in a community. What do you want that community to be like? Step up and make it be the way you want. Be the leader you know you can be and build new bridges of acceptance and co-operation within your community, and create a better world for ourselves and our children as we continue our amazing journey aboard this Spaceship Earth.

As you prepare to leave this place and chase your dreams as our Spaceship spins, I’d like to quote from 2 of my favorite philosophers.

Batman says, “It is not who I am underneath, but what I do that defines me.” That’s right, it is not who you are underneath, but what you do that defines you.

And finally, from my favorite intergalactic philosopher, Master Yoda: “do or do not, there is no try.”

Life is short, the stakes are high, ride the edge, the razor’s edge, the time is now.

Thank you again for the opportunity to share this special day with you. Congratulations once again to you and your families, and Go Seahawks!