I want to congratulate you as you are awarded the degree recognizing your achievements. Regardless of your field of study, your education has emphasized the crucial difference between the quest for some abstract absolute truth and the more mundane pursuit of elusive truths in the plural. The pursuit of truths rests on the complex and messy mix of empirical information, critical reasoning, and an understanding of the context within which ideas develop, flourish, and often die.

We live in a time of resurgent and dangerous universalizing ideologies. Political and religious leaders in the United States, the Middle East, and other regions not only claim to possess absolute truths but also seem determined to impose their convictions on the world around them. Absolute truths blind us to the unpleasant realities of a rapidly changing world. If we are open enough intellectually to recognize these changes, then we can adapt to them, flourish, and even lead in the world. If we choose not to pay attention, then we face grave risks to our society and way of life.

Studies of survival in crisis situations show that the single most important factor deciding who lives and who dies is whether individuals are willing to discard the mental map of their environment that they have always worked with and instead to improvise a new map based on the hard realities of the crisis they face. One simply cannot do this if bound to an absolute ideological system—the single Truth that defines the world.

When societies face major challenges, their developmental pathways to growth, or else to stasis or to collapse, are almost never predetermined. Instead, the history we observe is a composite outcome of social structure, cultural values, and the
decisions of individuals or groups. We like to think that culture is the ultimate adaptation that ensures human survival, but in fact the archaeological record is replete with examples of the cultural and physical extinction of human groups. Archaeology can give us some very useful perspectives on how and why societies flourish or collapse.

I want to tell you an archaeological story about Vikings, cows, and Inuit Eskimos; about climate, culture, and starvation. It's about the choice between adhering to a perception of absolute Truth versus learning from multiple messy truths in the making.

The strange history of Norse Greenland is one of the few known cases where the native peoples won out over the European colonizers, so that it was the Norse who became extinct in Greenland and not the Inuit. In about 1000 AD, the Norse and Inuit peoples were both colonizing the western coast of Greenland from opposite directions. Led by Erik the Red, the Norse settled Greenland at a time of climatic optimum and established settlements wherever land was available for their churches and farmsteads.

Because of their extreme northerly location, the Norse settlers were never able to grow wheat or other food crops. Instead, they depended for food on their herds of cattle, sheep, and goats; and they used the available land to raise hay for fodder. Even in the best of times, this fragile economy could support only a small population of the about six thousand Norse Greenlanders. The colony survived for about four hundred years, until the onset in about 1400 AD of a climatic downturn generally called the “Little Ice Age.” As conditions worsened, all contact with Europe was lost. For almost two hundred years, no ships came to bring lumber or other supplies. When the Europeans finally did return, they found the settlements abandoned. Not a single Norse Greenlander had survived. Only the Inuit people remained. What happened? No textual records survive from that last crucial century. But archaeological excavations of both Norse and Inuit settlements on Greenland
provide that messy mix of small truths that together show us exactly how a society can collapse. When we compare the two groups, we can see that the death of Norse Greenland was caused not by nature but by culture.

The artifacts and food remains recovered from excavations in the Norse settlements show a pattern of “cultural blindness”—the adherence to an ideology and pattern of behavior that completely failed as the social and physical landscape changed around them. The Norse were wholly dependent on their cattle for survival. Even though an incredibly rich set of wild resources—such as fish, whales, ringed seals, and walruses—was available, we find almost no traces of the bones of these animals in the refuse of the Norse settlements. The Norse simply refused to consider them as food. Instead, they focused on their cattle even as the climate worsened and these poor animals had to remain stabled indoors and be fed hay for almost ten months a year.

When archaeologists compared the households of the Norse and the Inuit, the contrasts were remarkable. The Norse settlements yielded almost no examples of native Inuit artifacts—none of the harpoons, snow goggles, kayaks, or other technology that made the Inuit such effective hunters in the harsh environment of Greenland. By contrast, the Inuit settlements yielded numerous examples of Norse goods, such as iron knives, fire-starting kits, and arrowheads. This shows us that the Inuit were very open to borrowing Norse technology and adapting it to their own needs. The food remains tell a similar story. Inuit sites are also filled with the bones of the ringed seal—an abundant wild resource that they hunted with deadly efficiency using their kayak and harpoon technology. It is very striking that almost no bones of those ringed seals occur anywhere in the Norse settlements. Astoundingly, the Norse refused to adopt any part of the Inuit economic system—despite its clear success, even though it was right in front of their eyes to observe, and even though their own economic system slowly and catastrophically failed as the Little Ice Age worsened.
It is easy to think of the Norse Greenlanders as victims of an unstoppable environmental calamity. But that is simply not the case. Consider this—at the same time the Norse were dying out, the Inuit people were prospering and, in fact, expanding their territories in Greenland. Norse society did not perish in a denuded environment after every last scrap of food was exhausted. In fact, the Norse simply failed to make use of the rich resources that were all around them.

What was the source of the cultural blindness that had such devastating consequences for the European Greenlanders? We know a fair amount about the pervasive ideology of the medieval Scandinavians from their law codes and sagas. The Norse worldview rigidly partitioned society into a series of absolute dual oppositions: law, society, home, and order lay on one side; and dangerous, lawless chaos lay on the other. What we would call “nature” was for the Norse the “wilderness”—a place of physical threat and of Evil. This absolute worldview imprisoned the Norse within walls of their own making—so that distant hunting grounds were places to be feared rather than exploited; and their Inuit neighbors were barely human enemies to be shunned or killed, rather than trading partners or potential allies. The Norse seem to have instinctively rejected any Inuit technology or cultural knowledge as tainted and dangerous by its very nature.

The case of the Norse Greenlanders has disquieting parallels with the present through its combination of an unenlightened self-interest, a willful ignorance, and a maladaptively rigid worldview. Many of our own elites, like those of the Norse, are very certain of the Truth of the ideologies that guide them—even when this ideology is completely at odds with the massive changes taking place in our social, physical, and economic environment.

How effectively we deal with these changes depends on our ability to discern the messy truths, to evaluate them critically, and to act on them with expertise—rather than being blinded by adherence to a single overarching Truth. Your education here has given you the tools to do this better than almost any other group that I can think
of. We are going to need your abilities and judgment. So if you see someone out there who can hunt down and kill a ringed seal better than you can, I advise you to pay close attention and learn from them.

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