

Commencement Speech  
Department of Economics  
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Delivered by Martha L. Olney (olney@berkeley.edu)

Good Morning Class of 2017! Welcome everyone on this glorious morning! Thank you so much for being here to help us celebrate our graduates. Thank you especially for coming out today, on Mother's Day.

And because today is Mother's Day, we have a special gift for each graduate. After you cross the stage and receive your hood or scroll, you can pick up a flower to give to the person you want to honor on this Mother's Day. And to everyone, Happy Mother's Day

I am so honored and humbled to be your commencement speaker today. Shachar extended the invitation to me back in September and immediately I knew what I wanted to talk about. After November 8th, I thought "I need to change my speech." After the death this winter of an incredible friend and social activist, I thought "I need to change my speech." After a campus lockdown and "shelter in place" order was issued here one February night, I thought "I need to change my speech." But every time I had that thought I came back to the same ideas and the same message.

So . . . let me begin.

I believe we are ALL created equal

I believe we are endowed with certain inalienable rights, rights we cannot be separated from.

I believe that chief among those rights is life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

I believe that you are loved, that you are lovable, that you are valued not because you love someone who is graduating from Berkeley, not because you have earned a Bachelors Degree from Berkeley, not because you are receiving a PhD from Berkeley, not because you have a job at Berkeley . . . I believe that you are loved and lovable and valued simply by virtue of your birth

I believe that we are each called to make the world a better place

And I believe that being a California Golden Bear means combining your education, your skills, and your passion to change the world

So let me talk today about the ways in which each of us can change the world.

Contrary to what you might have heard or read recently in certain news outlets, an important part of your Berkeley education is not - not - teaching you what to think. But let me be clear. An important and vital part of your Berkeley education is teaching you how to think. We - all of us, the faculty, the GSIs, and you, our students - together we all work long and hard to help you develop the skill of thinking like an economist

And what *is* that skill? Let me review.

Someone says or writes something that you disagree with, and what do you do? You could – and many do – find a spot on Sproul Plaza and simply yell. Yelling may be cathartic. It’s certainly a common sight on the Plaza. But I don’t think yelling is effective in persuading others. It doesn’t move the conversation forward.

To think like an economist means instead that we take certain steps when we confront an argument. There are 5 steps.

Step 1: Replicate the argument. Make sure you fully understand what the other person - the one you think you disagree with – is saying. “Let me see if I’ve got this right. You’re saying . . .”

Step 2: Identify the assumptions in their argument. “Ok, but in order to make your argument, you assumed this, and that, and this other thing, right?” Some of those assumptions will be explicit –stated, written down, right there for you to see. But many of those assumptions, and often the most important ones, will be implicit: assumptions that are necessary for the argument to hold together, but have not been shared explicitly.

Step 3: Choose one assumption – just one – and change that one assumption. “Yeah, but what if we assumed instead . . .”

Step 4: With your new assumption, but following the same line of reasoning the other person first offered, argue through to the conclusion. Do you come to a new conclusion? If so, fabulous! Coming to a new conclusion means you have identified a critical, key, important, essential assumption to the argument.

Step 5: Provide evidence in support of your alternative assumption. That evidence may be empirical. It may be rhetorical. The evidence may be quantitative. It may be qualitative. One way or another, defend your alternative assumption.

That’s it. Five steps: Replicate, Identify, Change, Argue, Defend. That’s what we tried to teach you over the last few years. That’s what it means to think like an economist . . . or, at least, to think like me.

So what does this have to do with changing the world? Everything.

Step 3. Remember Step 3? Step 3 is the “but what if . . . “ step. It’s where we change an assumption and see where that leads us. Changing the world is all about exploring the “but what if...”’s in life

So, how can you change the world? Let me give you some examples.

Let me start with some people up here on the stage.

You could – like Prof. Christina Romer, or before her Prof. Janet Yellen, or Prof. Laura Tyson – you could become chair of the Council of Economic Advisers, and use your economic knowledge

and skill to help craft economic policy that affects the entire nation.

You could – like Prof. Emmanuel Saez and his co-authors – you could conduct economic research that fundamentally changes the public’s understanding of the extent and nature of economic inequality

You could – like Prof. Ray Hawkins – you could follow a career in finance with a second career in teaching, sharing your passion and knowledge with hundreds of students every year.

Perhaps you’re not quite ready to be an Econ prof? Ok

Maybe you could gather a group of people together to help solve a problem. After the attacks last summer in Nice France and Dhaka Bangladesh killed two Berkeley students, three of your classmates – Tyler Heintz, Anjali Banerjee and Alice Ma – created a class aimed at finding the technological means to help combat international terrorism. Later this month they go to Washington DC to present their findings to government and industry officials. That’s changing the world.

Or maybe you will take a job and work on a project that will affect others. Anushah Hossain, who graduated two years ago, was part of a team designing public sanitation in India that women would use because it felt safe. That’s changing the world.

Or Alice. Alice Wu just finished her undergrad thesis in which she looks at gender bias in an online forum called “Econ Job Rumors.” She documented what a lot of us know from experience: even though things are better than they were when I was your age, there is still a lot of sexism in economics. Documenting a situation is the first step toward changing it.

Maybe research isn’t your thing. Ok. Let’s think about public service. That “but what if . . .” thing works there, too.

Sofie Karasek graduated in 2015. Together with other survivors of sexual assault, she founded a non-profit called End Rape on Campus. They started by challenging a fundamental assumption – but what if . . . we don’t assume ‘sexual assault is a normal part of college life.’

You don’t have to start your own non-profit to change the world. Gurubala Kotta helps to build houses with Habitat for Humanity. “But what if . . . people without financial means but with time and commitment *could* become homeowners?”

Kenny Lo volunteers with the ASUC legal clinic and provides pro bono legal consulting to low-income clients. “But what if . . . legal advice was provided to those who can not afford an attorney’s fees?”

Any number of you, whose names I don’t know, volunteered at local schools as tutors or writing coaches. “But what if . . . a child from a low-income family had access to tutoring from some of the brightest kids in town?”

And then there are the many other ways in which we each make a difference, changing the world

a little bit at a time.

We exercise our voice by writing or calling our elected officials. We tell them what our priorities are. We say, “But what if . . . our number 1 goal is not maximizing GDP but instead saving our environment?” Or perhaps “But what if . . . We start from the premise that health care is a right?”

We sit late into the night and listen to a friend, gently prodding “But what if . . . you think about it this other way?”

We slow down, make eye contact, acknowledge the homeless guy sleeping on the grate. “But what if . . . we assume everyone is entitled to respect?”

We learn about others who are different than ourselves, whose life experiences are so different than anything we ever imagined, and we revise our thinking and our behavior accordingly. Asking “But what if . . . everyone did not grow up the way I did?”

In so many ways, big and small and in between, we each have the power to make a difference in the world. To combine our knowledge, our skill, and our passion. To live out what it means to be a Golden Bear.

And so now I’m going to ask you to do one thing. Now You all know I’m all about active learning. But I’m going to guess you did not bring your clicker. So here’s what we’re going to do.

I want you to think about one thing that you can do to change the world. Not just the graduates. Everyone – family and friends, too. Everyone on stage, too. Think about one thing you can do to change the world, to make the world a better place. It can be big. It can be small. It can be in between.

Did you think? Are you ready?

Ok, now, here’s a little trick I learned. If you verbalize that thing, if you say it out loud, you are more likely to remember to do it. And if you say it out loud while you adopt a power stance, arms up, or hands on your hips, if you say it out loud while you adopt a power stance, you’ll really remember.

So I want to ask everyone to please, if you’re able, stand up. Adopt a power stance – arms up! Or hands on your hips – and all at once, when I count three, all at once, I want you to say out loud that one thing you will do to change the world.

Are you Ready? 1 - 2 - 3. One more time, nice and loud: 1 - 2 - 3

Now Go out there and do it! Go out there and be a Golden Bear!

Thank you and go Bears!