

ALI VELSHI
UNIVERSITY OF CENTRAL ASIA
CLASS OF 2024 CONVOCATION
JUNE 15, 2024

Good morning, everyone.

Your Excellencies Dogdurkul Kendirbaeva, Minister of Education and Science of the Kyrgyz Republic;

Saidzoda Rahim Hamro, Minister of Education and Science of the Republic of Tajikistan.

Altynbek Ergeshov, Governor of Naryn Oblast.

Mirzonabot Alisher Khudoberdi, Governor of Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast.

Dr Shamsh Kassim-Lakha, Chairman of the Board of Trustees.

Members of the Board.

Acting Rector Chris Gerry.

Maxim Khomyakov, Dean of the School of Arts and Sciences;

UCA faculty and staff.

Parents and family members.

Distinguished guests....

AND...graduates of the Class of 2024:

Congratulations! This is a tremendous accomplishment.

Thank you very much for inviting me. I am so honored to deliver this year's convocation address — to be able to speak in this magical place in front of you all on this incredibly special day.

This is a particular honor for me because I have worked with University of Central Asia students before. I know how bright, curious, and hardworking you all are.

In 2018, I was invited to the Khorog campus in Tajikistan, in part to help lead a business plan competition for UCA students.

This business competition followed a similar structure to those types of competitions with which I have been involved in the United States. I'm sure many of you are familiar with the idea: groups of students had to identify a business problem in their locality or country or region and find a solution that could be applied at a local level. Through the course of the competition, I was able to teach them some macroeconomic principles and exposed them to lessons and examples of small ideas that had become big economic successes and which, in the process,

brought prosperity and success to both the people who undertook those risks, and to their families and communities.

Those students — like you all — were a bit different from the students I had mentored before. The students in Tajikistan were from countries I hadn't spent much, if any, time in, and from cultures about which I knew very little.

I arrived with no idea what to expect from them. But I left amazed.

Their proposed business projects were incredible. They were as motivating, exciting, good, and as able to be invested in as those of the students I have mentored in America, who had *grown up* in the infrastructure of start-ups, which is what successful business plans often become.

Those Khorog students taught me that if you give people the resources, they have the capacity to do great things. Your capacity for innovation has absolutely nothing to do with where you're from. Given the necessary tools, every one of us is capable of making real strides towards bettering not only ourselves, but our societies.

That's the key here. You all, University of Central Asia graduates. YOU have been given this incredible power — this *power* of transformative knowledge that you have only just begun to cultivate.

This is your opportunity. The key to success is a place where potential - with which every single human is born - intersects with opportunity. Opportunity is what you have been given with this incredible education. Opportunity was what you seized when you applied, accepted admission and commenced your studies here.

In the meantime, you've learned not only from cutting edge professors, but from your sharp, witty peers on these beautiful campuses among the mountains.

You've learned all about Global Economics, Earth and Environmental Sciences, Computer Science, and Communications and Media.

You've learned hard work, and you have persevered.

But for some people, despite hard work and perseverance, opportunity doesn't come to them. For you, it did. Your diploma is proof that the bolt of opportunity struck you. And you grabbed that bolt and claimed it. Now, you get to take all this out into the world. Into a world that desperately needs you.

Central Asia needs you. It is at a pivotal moment:

As you know, climate change is ravaging the region's ecological infrastructure, through intense heat waves, droughts, and heavy rainfall.

Devastating floods are hurting agricultural yields, leading to a crisis of food insecurity. This problem is amplified for communities like the ones from which many of you come, in mountain villages.

And 22 million people in Central Asia lack access to clean drinking water.

Alongside this, schools across the region face teacher and resource shortages — lacking textbooks and other materials necessary for childhood learning. This difficult access to education makes these existential issues facing the region even scarier.

And, of course, it makes your achievement today, graduating from the University of Central Asia, even more notable.

You've spent four years learning about the myriad of issues facing your countries, your generation, your cultures.

And you certainly don't need me, a guy from all the way across the world, telling you about these issues, or about how hard you worked to get here, or about what you need to do to help your countries and your people.

You know what needs to be fixed. I'm just here to encourage you to go out and do it. Make it your mission to dedicate yourself, and your work, and possibly the rest of your life, to the service of others. And those others can be others within your household, your extended family, your community, your nation, your region, and the world.

I graduated from university thirty years ago; it was a vastly different time, in a country very unlike the ones you are from. But perhaps you will see some of yourselves in my story.

I knew, vaguely, that I was interested in journalism, but I had no clear direction that I would pursue. Nobody in my family was involved in journalism and, as a minority in Canada, hardly anyone who looked like me was, either.

And, perhaps to some degree, I was looking for something to do with my life that was outside of my family industry.

You see, my family industry was: public service.

Some people see public service as something they simply don't have time for. But my parents were different. The way they saw it, even if public service isn't something you **love** to do, it's something that **needs to get done.**

The potholes in the streets don't fix themselves. The libraries and hospitals don't fund themselves. The garbage doesn't pick itself up. And while we often think of these things as things that are the responsibility of the government, the government works best with the input and participation of the public. YOU know best what works for your community and your society, and you need to get involved to make the changes you know need to be made.

Of course, I understood why this all mattered — and that **someone** had to get it done. I just didn't want to be the one to do it.

I graduated from university wide-eyed and optimistic. I started my career as a journalist wanting to make an impact — but I didn't think of my career as a journalist as a public service. To me, it was a job. Not a public service.

And as I got further into my career, exposed to all the problems facing my city and my country and my region and the world, it didn't occur to me that me, doing my job, could have any meaningful impact on all of those big problems. There was no way I could *really* make a change.

I was a reporter for my local news - it was limited to my city - Toronto - and the areas around it. I reported on car accidents, house fires, murders, and little kittens that got stuck in trees. Those were simpler times and the kittens stuck in trees were most exciting. Sometimes we'd have three or four cameras on the kitten stuck in the tree, so you could get the fireman's rescue from multiple angles on TV.

Canada, where I grew up, could get very very cold in winter. On one uniquely cold day, I was sent to the Toronto Zoo to do a story on how it was *so* cold that even the polar bears were trying to get back indoors. Stories about how cold and snowy it was in a place that is naturally cold and snowy always made me feel a little bit dumb. They certainly didn't make me feel like I was changing the world. Even a little bit.

After working in local news, I moved on to business reporting, becoming Canada's first prime time business anchor - prime time being the most important time in news, when people are home after work and after dinner and watch the news on TV. I interviewed economists and political and business leaders about big industry shake-ups. I reported more about *what* happened than *why* it had happened, even though the "why" is often more important than the fact that something happened. I didn't ask the really important questions, about whether what was being done was the *right* thing to do, morally or ethically. I didn't interrogate much at all. I was not doing the most important things a journalist is meant to do.

Don't get me wrong — I was successful but, intellectually, it was all a bit lazy. To me, my journalism was a good job, not a public service. It wasn't contributing to progress on the issues that really mattered to my community, city or country.

And at some point, doing it that way stopped being enough for me. It was unsatisfying.

In trying to understand the role of my work in my community, I started to think of my family, and the way they looked at how work and public service combine with one another.

Let me tell you a little about my family background.

My great grandparents fled drought and debt under British colonialism in India.

My grandfather was raised as a peace advocate in South Africa. He was the youngest student of the great Mahatma Gandhi, the legendary Indian freedom fighter whose work led to Indian independence in 1947.

My father, who had no university education, was the first person of South Asian descent to be elected to a major political office in Canada.

My mother was, who didn't even finish high school, ran for even more senior office than my father held in Canada, and would have been elected, if she didn't choose to step out of the election to take care of my grandmother, who had raised me, but become ill just prior to the election.

My sister was also a politician. She worked for local, and state elected representatives and as a civil servant, and also ran for office. All three of them: my father, mother and sister, were immigrants to Canada, and they were immigrants to Kenya before that. Everyone in my family is a double immigrant.

Still, they felt a burning desire to get involved and make their community - their new, chosen community - better and stronger.

Prior to all this civic involvement, my family had suffered economic hardship and political persecution. Yet through it all, they never succumbed to hopelessness or despair. They never resigned themselves to the idea that their actions were futile or that they had no agency in determining their own path in life.

At every critical juncture, they chose to use what resources they had to make the biggest difference they could, sometimes for the sake of their own survival, but often for the good of their community and the larger society around them.

I call these their “small acts of courage.”

I have learned from those acts. Now I realize it’s not what you are qualified to do, but it’s who you are, the change you want to make, combined with the qualifications you have earned and the opportunities with which you are presented, that matters.

Now I realize the importance of the role I play. I am a journalist. I don’t want to be the kind of journalist that takes on the easy issues. I want to take on the hard ones — the ones upon which my attention, and my resources, can really have an effect.

Now, as graduates from the University of Central Asia, you all are suddenly endowed with the power of resources. The question becomes, what impact can you make? What can your small acts of courage be?

Recent history is full of examples for you. Worldwide, of course, but also here, in Central Asia.

Take the story of the feldsher in Naryn, where access to healthcare faces huge hurdles due to the region’s mountainous terrain. One courageous feldsher not only administers vaccines but dedicates herself to educating and empowering her community about the importance of vaccines.

It may seem like she’s taking on just a sliver of work — a small population of mountain dwellers in Naryn — but she’s saving lives, no matter how few.

But maybe you’re not interested in health sciences, so this doesn’t resonate with you.

Take instead the story of a postdoctoral researcher from Kazakhstan, who now works on accessibility systems in the United Kingdom. She acts as a mentor for girls in Kazakhstan, empowering them to pursue STEM fields.

Again, this may seem small. But she’s laying the foundation for technological empowerment for a whole generation of Kazakh girls.

Maybe mentorship isn't how you want to make change.

Then take the teams of engineers in Tajikistan helping improve water access for residents who are experiencing a critical water shortage in Khatlon, one of the country's driest regions. Those engineers are simply doing their jobs — but they're orienting themselves towards resources

There's something truly infectious about the energy of people who dare to think big, even when the tangible scale of their actions is small. People who aren't daunted by the sheer number of problems in the world.

You have to ask for unreasonable, outsized things to spark the world's imagination, to make people question whether a better world is even possible.

And *you*, all of you, now have the power to be those people: to ask – and to act. Do not squander that power. Decades from now, when your children and your grandchildren ask you about this time of remarkable change and challenge into which you are graduating, do not be haunted by the risks you did not take, by the dreams you did not pursue.

There is nothing but opportunity and choice in front of you.

Choose purpose.

Choose change.

Choose to make things better for those around you, and you will make things better for the world. Start with small acts. With each small success, you will get stronger and better able to solve bigger problems..

Class of 2024, there's an entire world awaiting on the other side of this diploma.

I am so very excited for you to go out and explore, discover and change the world

Be smart. Have courage. And make change.

And finally, congratulations.