To the Class of 2010 Congratulations.

This is a very special moment for you and your families and I want to wish all of you only the best.

You – the graduates – have worked really hard to reach this milestone. This is a truly impressive achievement, and all of you should be very proud.

My daughter graduated from college not that long ago – so, as a parent, I can certainly relate to what all you moms and dads are feeling right now.

I want to thank Father Levesque and the Board of Trustees of Niagara University for inviting me here today and bestowing this great honor on me.

I would also like to thank the wonderful faculty of this university. You do amazing work and are all heroes in my eyes.

Congratulations also to my fellow honorees. I am proud to be associated with you.

This is truly an outstanding university with a proud mission of helping the needy. You have a world-wide network of wonderful graduates. You are part of an excellent tradition.

It is also especially meaningful since Niagara is no stranger to me and my family.

I grew up in the shadow of this university. Like so many others here in Western New York, I enjoyed watching Niagara basketball during my formative years. It helped me appreciate basketball to this very day.

I bring you greetings by the way from three Niagara grads and good friends:

Bill Press, the radio talk show host and former CNN Crossfire host, from the class of 1965.

Rick DiBella, my CNN producer, from the class of 1991.

And Father David O’Connell, the President of The Catholic University of America, from the class of 1978. He also received an honorary degree from Niagara in 2008. He asked me to pass along his best wishes to everyone, especially to all the Vincentian Fathers.

These are three very different Niagara grads but they all have one thing in common: they all love this university – and for good reason. And they are all good men – deeply influenced by their years at Niagara. This four-year education is not just classes and homework. Like all of you, they also took away life-long lessons that inspired their values and morals.

I am an optimist by nature. I think in part because of the optimism that my mom and dad always had – despite some very difficult experiences in their own lives. They came to Buffalo as immigrants who struggled to make a living and raise two kids. But they did just fine – thanks to a
lot of hard work, strong values, a ton of love, a welcoming warm community, and some luck as well.

Yes, they certainly had some lucky breaks but even more important, they took full advantage of each and every one. Here’s some advice: if you get a lucky break, don’t coast with it; don’t waste or misuse it; grab it and make the most of it.

More on that coming up.

We meet today at a very difficult period in our history.

There are so many problems out there – many of them with seemingly no end in sight.

The disaster of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico is enormous. It makes me sick to see those live pictures of the oil simply gushing out of those pipes – knowing how much damage is being caused.

There are so many other problems.

The unemployment and underemployment rates in our country are way too high. There are too many people who can’t find a job and too many people who are way too qualified for the jobs they have no choice but to accept.

Economists tell me there is still serious fear that we could be heading back toward another recession even though the economy has just emerged from the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

The problems are not just at home.

We have seen tensions increase in several key flash points around the world, including on the Korean peninsula. The North Koreans just sunk a South Korean warship. Not too long ago – that kind of action could have sparked a war – and it could still right now.

There is also a genuine crisis with Iran and its nuclear ambitions – and that crisis could quickly escalate in the coming months as well. It probably will.

Let’s also not forget the U.S. still has more than 200,000 troops fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. While some pundits are upbeat that things eventually will move in the right direction, there is no guarantee of a successful outcome. Just ask all the top U.S. military commanders on the ground. I have. And as a result, I remain deeply worried about the long-term prospects for both countries despite the enormous U.S. sacrifice in blood and treasure.

And there is the constant threat of terror. We have seen some serious plots thwarted – barely. The Christmas Day underwear bomber on that plane over Detroit and the more recent Times
Square bomber underline the problem. So, too, does the Ft Hood, Texas massacre. I have no doubt that more plots are on the way.

But you may be surprised to hear that I am still optimistic because in part I see graduates like you – ready to take the plunge and work hard and do the right thing. Multiply what is happening here with the hundreds of thousands of graduates around the country – all eager, hard-working and ready to make a contribution.

When I look into this crowd my faith in the future of our country is restored.

Let’s also remember that the United States has faced many enormous challenges over its history – some seemingly without hope. If we survived the Civil War, the Great Depression, World War II, and the nuclear fears of the Cold War, we will survive these current crises as well.

And remember this: In the past, we not only survived; we thrived. Our country emerged stronger and smarter following each crisis. We will again.

This is your moment to accept the challenge and take advantage of it.

There are so many new opportunities out there – careers in the new technologies that have only recently emerged or are still on the way.

It is dizzying for me to see the amazing breakthroughs resulting from the Internet. And we are only just scratching the surface.

I know many of you are wondering whether there are jobs; whether there are genuine opportunities; whether your careers can take off.

You are not alone in wondering.

But the answer is yes. I am sure you can do it. I have no doubt.

It wasn’t all that long ago when I had those same fears. When I graduated from college, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do. I wasn’t sure if I would ever get a REAL job. I was deeply worried.

But I worked really hard, took advantage of every break, exploited those opportunities and soon things began to fall into place.

And over these decades, I never really slowed down. When I was a young, budding journalist, one old-timer told me: “You’re only as good as your last story.” He was right.

Bottom line – no matter what field you pursue – keep doing your very best every single day. The competition is intense – and it’s not just from other Americans. The world is a much smaller place now-a-days. We now have to compete with world-class brains from around the world. It is truly becoming a global village.
In this current economic environment, when there are so many people who are looking for jobs, you have no luxury of slacking or going on cruise control.

Here’s another piece of advice: you are way too young right now to settle. Don’t give up on your dream. If you can combine your livelihood with your passion – you will enjoy work and life so much more.

I know I get up every morning and look forward to going to work. I love my job. I am truly blessed with my career at CNN. I have a front-row seat to history. I get paid to ask newsmakers tough questions. Can you imagine? For a journalist, it doesn’t get any better.

Earlier this month, by the way, I celebrated my 20th anniversary at CNN. It has been an amazing ride every single day covering all the big stories of our time – whether the first Gulf War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of Apartheid in South Africa, 9/11, the wars that followed, and the election of the first African American President in U.S. history.

On June first, CNN will celebrate its 30th anniversary. Ted Turner, a true pioneer, had a vision of a 24/7 television news organization. He created it and changed the way all of us get the news.

I know that I will be a little bit smarter when I go to sleep at night than I was when I woke up. That’s because I learn something every day.

If you can feel that same excitement in your career, you will be so much better at whatever you do.

In short, if you can find that job you really love, grab it. In the end, you may discover that you have to settle for second or even best in order to make a living. But right now, if possible, keep your dream career alive.

And having sat in your seats, I know that your immediate dream is for me to wrap this up – so you can begin the celebration. You should. Be happy and enjoy this day. You deserve it.

Thanks again to Niagara University for inviting me. Thanks again to the Class of 2010.