Your Highnesses, Your Excellencies, Members of the NYU Abu Dhabi and NYU Communities, Distinguished Guests, and Families of our graduates,

Hello and Welcome.

Ah-lan wa Sah-lan wa Mar-ha-ban bi-kum!

It is a great privilege to have this opportunity to speak briefly to why I consider the model of undergraduate education NYUAD offers essential to our times.

50 years ago today, I was completing my Junior year at Princeton, and ready to set off for Taiwan to begin the study of Chinese, a pursuit I continue to value greatly, as each step forward allows me to connect more deeply with the infinite complexities and subtleties of another cultural world. I charted an adventurous route, stopping in Lebanon, Syria, Iran and Afghanistan, and then crossing India, Thailand and Cambodia, to reach Taiwan. It was an amazing journey not only because of its impact on shaping my life and career but because it offered me an experience of the world that cannot be had again.

Whether I was bargaining in the suqs of Damascus or the markets of Kabul, riding an open truck across the Indian desert, or enjoying the inexhaustible generosity of my host family in Taiwan, I felt again and again a sense of being immersed in distinct cultural worlds, largely sealed off in communication and impact from each other, and from the rest of the globe. Certainly that sense was exaggerated by romantic imagination, nevertheless the contrast with the way one experiences the world today is quite striking.

Over the past half century staggering developments in worldwide communication and transportation, in the flow of products and the transfer of ideas, have so drawn the world together that the English language, international brands, foods, fashions, icons, and values now penetrate its most remote regions, and the prosperity, security, health, and aspirations of each people and nation have become critically dependent on the state of the whole.

That mutual connectedness offers unprecedented opportunities for cooperation, but our capacity to cooperate, even around the most critical challenges we face – from the environment, to poverty, to peace - has lagged dangerously behind a growing vulnerability, rooted in our dependence on one another in a world marked by continuing population growth, depletion of resources, spread of highly destructive technologies and persistent divisiveness and conflict.

In the context of these historic conditions New York University reconceived itself as network of global sites, setting a model in education, research and vision, of how a university might begin to connect a divided world.

And in the context of these historic conditions NYU Abu Dhabi was established as an institution that would at once extend NYU’s global network into the Middle East, create a leading university in education and research in Abu Dhabi, and at the undergraduate level offer a daring model of how undergraduate education can both deliver a superb intellectual and ethical foundation for life and develop in its students the habits of mind and person required for bridging difference and building cooperation in a global world.
To meet that undergraduate educational ambition, it set itself the task, first, of producing an academic and student life program that would develop the analytic and creative power, the intellectual depth and breadth, the complex and sensitive ethical intelligence, and the examined sense of what is significant for one’s self, for one’s societies and for the world to achieve – in other words, the time-tested hallmarks of fine undergraduate education.

It then sought to enrich that intellectual and ethical foundation, with the skills and resolve required to find and forge common ground across national, cultural, ideological and experiential divides— the skills and resolve that can transform global interdependence and vulnerability into unprecedented global cooperation towards a more productive, inclusive, responsible, and peaceful world.

How then did we seek to accomplish that unprecedented educational task?

Most fundamentally, by inviting students into a world of international experience, perspective and understanding — First, through recruiting from more than 110 nations, across six continents, students who excel academically, are passionate about understanding, and are committed to building on campus a community of respect and care across difference, as a microcosm of the world community they want to build. Second, through emphasizing, across the academic and broader educational program, and from multiple disciplinary perspectives, global knowledge and a global view. Third, through offering students intellectually and culturally engaging opportunities for direct global experience – including, up to two academic semesters as well as summer internships and research projects across NYU’s international sites.

And fourth, by creating a community of students, faculty and staff, that not only reflects the national, cultural and linguistic diversity of the world, but in which no one culture dominates, and in which historic hegemonies and traditional intercultural hostilities and frictions yield to an encompassing sense of equality and inclusion.

I am convinced that placing students with the intellectual and personal qualities we seek in a rigorous academic program, centered in critical reflection and global understanding, within a social context that deliberately fosters mutual respect and valuing, in turn encourages them to develop the habit of person and mind arguably most essential to reaching common ground across the divides of our world, namely the capacity and courage to listen thoughtfully across difference and to take seriously what one hears.

Thoughtful listening provides the evidence to contradict the overgeneralized nature of denigrating and alienating stereotypes that we apply to others, and to the groups to which they belong, opening avenues to identifying and building common ground that are unimaginable when stereotypes occlude a sympathetic view.

Thoughtful listening reveals, as well, that the differences we perceive between our own and another’s value positions often do not reflect fundamental differences in the values themselves, but rather differences in how values that we hold in common are weighed and balanced as they are applied to specific situations and policies.
For example, while individuals may come down differently on whether to sustain specific cultural practices or adopt those offered by a rapidly internationalizing world, they usually do not differ in the belief that some traditions should be sustained and others accommodated. Or, while individuals may differ on the speed and manner in which economic development should proceed, particularly because of the negative impact development can exert on the environment, those same individuals are likely to value both development and environmental preservation.

And, although individuals may differ when judging the success of a political system, about how much weight to give to its record in improving the living conditions of its population as against its record in offering its population participation in decision-making processes, the same individuals are likely to value both improved living conditions and participation. And, as it becomes clear how many basic values we hold in common with one another, it becomes easier to appreciate the other, and easier, although the process may take considerable time, to chart a path through difference.

And at the most general level, thoughtful listening leads inevitably to a recognition of the vast similarities in the infrastructure of human conceptual, linguistic, psychological and emotional life, in the needs for security, admiration and affection, in the capacities to enjoy humor and beauty, in the longing for opportunity and meaning, that we all share as human beings – a foundation upon which shared understanding and purpose can and are built, and a foundation, which once recognized, prompts us to extend our human inclination to empower others, beyond our families, groups and nation, to empower humanity at large.

In brief, I am persuaded that by starting with a historically-tested form of the highest quality undergraduate education, and adding to it significant emphasis on global knowledge, perspective and experience, within a context that expects thoughtful listening, and that reinforces its practice through regular reminders of our educational mission, NYUAD has shaped a powerful model of how education can prepare leaders of a more cooperative world.

I also believe that our exceptional results in student recruitment, the remarkable number of international awards our students have received, including an astonishing six Rhodes Scholars among our first 400 graduates, and the powerful magnet the institution has become for drawing outstanding faculty from leading institutions across the world, all constitute strong validation for the power and relevance of the paradigm of undergraduate education that NYUAD has sought to develop.

Close to the time that I set off on my first journey around the globe, U. S. President John Kennedy presented the world with two complementary challenges:

First, to land a human being on the moon, as a dramatic symbol of the technological and scientific progress needed to ensure a fulfilling future for humanity.

And second, to develop the consciousness and the institutions that would enable humanity to progress towards enduring peace.
Articulating his second challenge, at the commencement ceremony at American University in Washington, D.C. in 1963, President Kennedy called upon the graduates of American University in the following words:

I have ... chosen this time and place to discuss a topic on which ignorance too often abounds and the truth is too rarely perceived – yet is the most important topic on earth: peace ... What kind of peace do I mean and what kind of peace do we seek? ... Not merely peace in our time but peace for all time.

We must re-examine our own attitudes – as individuals and as a nation ... And every graduate of this school ... should begin by looking inward -- by examining his or her own attitude towards the possibilities of peace ... Too many of us think it is impossible. Too many think it is unreal. But that is a dangerous, defeatist belief. ... No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man's reason and spirit have often solved the seemingly unsolvable – and we believe they can do it again... Let us focus therefore... on a more attainable peace ... based on a gradual evolution in human institutions... For peace is a process – a way of solving problems.

It took 8 years for the U.S. to meet Kennedy’s first challenge and land a human being on the moon! Moreover, his words, followed rapidly by that historic accomplishment, ignited a renewed commitment from primary, secondary and higher education, across America, if not across the world, to technological and scientific education. We are still riding the wave of that renewed commitment and must take responsibility to sustain it through continued advance in scientific and technological understanding and in bringing that advance to the betterment of the human condition and the state of our globe.

But, over that same half-century, we seem sadly to have made very little progress in responding to Kennedy’s second challenge, to build an infrastructure, educational and institutional, for enduring peace. And for too many of us, the idea that there could be such a path still seems too idealistic, too impossible to even warrant serious consideration.

Yet, over the past several decades, educational institutions have been central, through transforming consciousness and acting on conscience, to advancing the struggles for empowering women and minorities, for achieving higher standards of humane treatment in our societies, and for taking responsibility for the health of our planet.

Today, it is incumbent on educational institutions to respond as seriously to Kennedy’s second challenge, to make developing the habits of person and mind prerequisite to global cooperation and peace deliberate elements of their educational programs. Let Kennedy’s words, joined to the successes achieved in other critical societal areas, act as sources of the determined optimism needed to convert skeptics into agents of positive change for global cooperation and peace. If educational institutions do not shoulder this responsibility it is unlikely that any other social institutions can or will.

Class of 2016, 10, 20 and 50 years from today, when you look back at the qualities of person and mind you have shaped and strengthened at NYUAD and their contribution to who you have become and to what you have accomplished, and when you observe how much the model of education we have built together may have influenced the direction of education worldwide, I am convinced you will feel deeply gratified about how, as individuals and as an institution, we have responded to Kennedy’s second challenge, by designing an educational path towards meeting the most urgent challenge of our times.
Warmest congratulations Class 2016 on your accomplishments so far and those achievements yet to come. And thank you!

Mabruck wa Shukran!